

Writer on Holiday

Is it possible for a nonfiction writer to have a pure holiday? I thought so, as I left Edmonton for Heathrow on the month's holiday I had planned as a leisurely itinerary from one friend to another, in England, Scotland and the south of France, visiting people and places not even remotely connected with my current writing projects (Byzantium, and the North Saskatchewan River). However, I was still reading newspapers and hanging out at my favorite provocative venues and collecting pamphlets and postcards, so it was inevitable that the on-going world of controversy and contention caught my attention, even as I dawdled in cafes and bookstores, and strolled on heaths and firths, and, at five o'clock in the afternoon in the French village of Montlaur in my cousin's soon-to-be B&B, drank a glass of pastis no matter what.

Take France, for example. Massive strikes by unionized workers against proposed national reforms to their pension plans had been going on for some weeks, but the day I flew in to Carcassonne all was quiet - for a day. Settling down with the pastis on a scorching late afternoon, I read a couple of newspapers, the national *Le Monde* and the regional *La Depeche du Midi*. In the former, I learned that the Secretary General of the CGT (France's largest congress of labour unions) had been hooted at by militant strikers who wanted him to call a general strike immediately, instead of just encouraging people to send postcards to their MPs "pour amplifier la mobilisation." As if.

Further into the paper, I read of a fascinating, even ghoulish, show-down at a venerable leftist journal, *Politis*, between one of its founding editors, Fabrice Nicolino, and the rest of the editorial board and a whole bunch of the journal's readers, provoked by Nicolino's column of May 8 in which he editorialized on the issue of pension plans and retirement packages. Nicolino's politics are on the eco-left, and the spectre of millions of retiring baby boomers, fat with their pensions, descending on the French equivalent of Wal-Mart's and SUV show lots and Burger Kings, made his hair stand on end. He argued that the 500 million middle class consumers of the "north" are unleashing an ecological catastrophe even as the residents of the "south" are reduced to living on one or two Euros a day. "We are living longer and longer, we really don't work more than 23 to 25 years. Those with pretensions to extreme leftism have become reactionary. Why don't we hear the least criticism of the proliferation of useless goods and of the hyper-consumption dear to so many pensioners?" The reaction from readers was impassioned: "How will it help the situation of the countries of the south to have French workers' income reduced by 30%?" vs "The left is still too hung up on the cult of progress and growth." The columnist in the regional paper described the rhetorical environment succinctly: "...a rather surrealist manichean confrontation between 'bourgies' and 'proles' which has rapidly evolved into hateful invective." ...I think I'll have some more of that pastis, please.

As it happens, this part of France in which I was holidaying - Languedoc-Rousillon - is no stranger to violent social struggle. Only a few kilometres down the road lies the

village of Lagrasse and its medieval abbey founded, according to legend, by Charlemagne passing through on his way to fight the Moors in Spain. Its abbot played the role of “mediator” in the savage crusade, incited by Pope Innocent III, of the French king and state against the Cathar heresy rooted in southern France in the 13th century (its adherents believed in the absolute dualism of good and evil - Manicheans!) In other words, he “secured the surrender” of the rebel city of Carcassonne to the king in 1226. You can tell from the tone of the rest of the pamphlet distributed at the abbey-museum that this is a happy ending. Alas, come the Revolution of 1789, and the monastic community, reduced to fourteen monks, was itself dispersed, and the property nationalized.

Crusaders and religious military orders such as the Templars poured war-like and ardent out of their southern French castles to overthrow the adversaries of the Christian faith, Cathars, Huguenots and most especially Moslems. But here I was, some 800 years later, in the city of Narbonne, after a pleasant lunch of mussels and frites in the pitiless heat of the breezeless cathedral square, making a tour of “The Oriental Mirage,” a collection of “Orientalist” paintings in the Museum of Art and History. All is forgiven, it seems, at least on the French side. The Muslim adversary has become “the inspiring source of colors and forms for a Europe fascinated by the fantasy of a Harem.” Nineteenth-century writer Theophile Gautier quipped that “Europeans talk a lot about poetry, Orientals put it into action.” Sumptuous and shimmering, this mirage of the Oriental “other” is the erotic analogue of that other Oriental subject, served up to the Crusaders: hook-nosed, hissing, and in scandalous occupation of Christianity’s holy sites.

As someone who has spent the last several years obsessed by the history of the cultures at the eastern end of the Mediterranean (Byzantine, Slavic, Ottoman, Orthodox), it was useful to be reminded of how western Europeans see their own historical context, which is to say usually without reference to eastern Christianity. So, for example, the French remain traumatized - to judge from a tourism brochure, “Discover Cathar Country” - by the fact that it was a Catholic primate, Innocent III, who rallied the “only crusade ever led on Catholic lands,” Christians shedding Christian blood in appalling and pitiless violence, but remain untroubled by that equally horrific anti-Christian crusade, the Fourth, that culminated in the sack of Constantinople in 1204, capital city of the Christian Roman Empire, aka Byzantium. And they weren’t even heretics!

In London, in the new and grand British Library just down the street from King’s Cross station, I spent a couple of vigilant hours at the special exhibit, “Painted Labyrinth: The World of the Lindisfarne Gospels,” curious to see how far east that world extended. It was a gorgeous exhibit, dedicated to an 8th century masterpiece of illuminated manuscript right there under glass, written and painted in honour of the Northumbrian saint, Cuthbert. “If you’re interested in understanding more about yourself and your heritage you’ll find new questions and new answers to the maze of the past,” I was assured by a Library brochure. Well, Anglo-Saxon and Celtic culture is part of my

heritage, along with those Byzantines, given my grandparents' homesteads in English-speaking Canada: would I understand myself better? About a hundred years after Byzantium's emperor extraordinaire, Justinian, built Christianity's largest and still stupendous church, the Hagia Sofia in Constantinople, Irish monks founded the remote and cheerless monastery at Lindisfarne. When it came time to bury their great saint, Cuthbert, they wrapped him in "exotic silks from the eastern Mediterranean," dyed purple in a technique that remained unknown in the west for another few centuries. When they sat down to paint their miniatures on the vellum pages of the Gospel, they laboured under the influence of the "linear style of mosaic portraits" gloriously achieved at Ravenna, that Byzantine city of Justinian patronage. Four hundred years after the peoples of the eastern Mediterranean received their Ecclesiastical History - ten volumes, by Eusebius, Bishop of Caesarea - the English peoples finally received theirs from Bede, Britain's first historian, in 731. Unlike the worldly Eusebius, Bede never travelled outside his home terrain, Northumbria, just one instance of the shrunken world of western Christianity compared to the intellectual and literary riches of the late Greco-Roman civilization inherited by Byzantium. But, as we all know now, the Brits would have their day, and this superb manuscript from Lindisfarne graphically fuses the cultures that lie in the British brain stem: Celtic, Romano-British and Germanic.

But in June 2003 young Londoners are post-imperial navel-gazers, to judge from the crowd packed into the theatre of the ICA [Institute for Contemporary Art] a stone's throw from Buckingham Palace, for a panel, "Empire Strikes Back," organized by The Economist magazine. They came not to denounce the American Empire but to look again at their own historical legacy. "Can empires be double-edged," asked the flyer, "traumatically imposing modernity and even democracy on their subjects?" The questions arrived direct from panelist Niall Ferguson's book, "Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World," which has revised the dire version of the British Empire (the one all we New Leftists from the 1960s-70s recognized from the work of dissident historians such as Robin Blackburn, another panelist). Ferguson is youthful, cheeky, and rather full of himself. "The British Empire was good for the global economy and therefore for global welfare," he declared, and charged the American Empire with being in denial of their own global power - he called it Inattention Span Disorder. "Greatness is being thrust on the USA," he lamented, a la Michael Ignatieff, and no one even hissed. With a sigh and heave of his shoulders, Blackburn once more trundled out the artillery of Marxist economics - "empires don't deliver economic development but semi-colonialism" - and argued that it is nationalism and social movements from below, not empire, that will deliver "freedom." No one cheered. For all that the crowd was youthful, diverse and attentive, it was oddly passionless. During the Q&A that followed, the panelists had all the best lines about values and empire, and I never got the chance to ask my question of Blackburn: "Is all resistance futile?"

The Enlightenment, Ferguson asserted to considerable hilarity, is a Scottish achievement. He was dead serious. It came from Calvinism "and Islam isn't going to produce anything like it." I thought about that one-liner a few days later in Scotland, reading the Scottish papers while enjoying drams of peaty whiskey in one of Robbie

Burns' favorite pubs in Dumfries. Maybe the Scots aren't going to reproduce it either, to judge from one columnist's anguished survey of Scotland's "culture shock." Liverpool had just been announced Britain's Capital of Culture for 2008, as Glasgow had been in 1990 (utterly changing it.) But that was a long time ago. Now, in a devolving Scotland, but always Labour, the political class no longer seems to believe, as they did in Thatcherite 1990 and as Liverpoolians now do, that "culture is not only about providing great art but is seen as the key to regenerating cities and transforming lives," in the words of columnist Magnus Linklater in Scotland on Sunday. No, in spite of the invigorating examples of Welsh and English cities reinventing themselves through artistic innovations - a flour mill into an electrifying art gallery, a re-landscaped port, an Arts Council touting the arts as a social unifying force - Scotland chooses philistinism. Standstill budgets, freezing of opera production, measuring outcomes instead of creativity, no obvious political champion of the arts: "Our approach," writes Linklater, "is niggardly, grudging and parsimonious."

The complaint was awfully familiar. I had left Alberta for a holiday and came full circle around to the same old place. Mind-broadening, isn't it? Travel, I mean.

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