

# DEAR BILL BRYSON\*

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\*Footnotes from a Small Island

# CALAIS - DOVER



# 1

There wasn't really a young man quoting Rousseau; there was no passing clergyman; I did not poke a woman in the eye. I made those things up to get your attention, which is what you're supposed to do at the start of a book. You're also supposed to start with a description of the weather, so I should add that, for the most part, it was overcast in Calais. I also suggested that the reason I chose to retrace Bryson's journey was because I was bored. Again, not true. The truth is that by copying Bryson I felt my writing might attract more than seven readers.

I was only in Calais for two hours. It should have been six, but I had missed my train at London Bridge that morning, having accepted a second bowl of porridge at a flat in Stockwell, causing me to miss my ferry crossing at Dover. I eventually took a delayed early-evening service, on which nothing much happened, though I might have sent a text message to a Spanish girl who told me two months earlier not to fall in love with her.

I walked into Calais's centre along the Rue Constant Dupont and the Rue Pierre Mullard – street names that seemed elegant and thrilling, despite their essential banality. I passed a pub called Le Liverpool, which looked sad and unpopulated. I suppose it was once busy with British day-trippers in shell-

suits stocking-up on Kronembourg and Côte du Rhône, the sort of people Bryson records seeing a lot of in '94. I wondered about the provenance of this pub. Perhaps, in the late 80s, a canny Frenchman thought he'd cash-in by giving the day-trippers a slice of home, understanding that the British tend to go overseas not to escape their culture but to find a warmer or cheaper version of it.

I came to the Place d'Armes, where I made a cursory effort to find a Virgin Mary bedside lamp. (Bryson bought one here, you see, before spending the evening playing with it in his hotel room.) I took a walk up to the old town to see the Rodin sculpture. *The Burghers of Calais* depicts half-a-dozen members of the city's medieval middle-class looking fed-up, on account of the King of England having just announced that they were to be executed the following Tuesday. The burghers were eventually pardoned after the King's better-half intervened. Rodin has a lesser known sculpture, round the back of the hotel, of the men looking relieved.<sup>1</sup>

I took the plat du jour at Au Bureau on the Rue Royal and drank two bottles of Stella Artois and it felt good and warm to be alone and softly drunk, having not eaten since the second bowl of porridge ten hours earlier. I enjoyed the strange anonymity of being foreign, when one is at once more and less obvious to others, more and less significant. I knew no one in this city; I had no appointments or obligations; I had never cried or laughed or made mistakes here. For all anyone knew, I might have been arrogant or timid or generous or sad. As I reflected on the cleansing effect of travel – that I was once again at the beginning of my character – the beef stew arrived.

Walking back to the ferry terminal, I thought about concrete. That Calais is mostly concrete is partly Britain's fault.

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<sup>1</sup> England retained Calais as a colony for about two hundred years, before the French took advantage of the habit of the English colonists of returning periodically to the motherland to stock-up on Kit-Kats by sneaking into Calais one evening and renaming all the streets in French. When the English returned they couldn't find their houses and so called the whole thing off. Most colonies, I have since learned, are recaptured in this fashion.

The city was bombed heavily by the Germans in 1940. Almost the whole town was levelled. What remained was then bombed by the British, who mistook Calais for Dunkirk, where there was still a German presence. It is easy to dislike concrete structures because they are so often featureless. (I mean, how many featureless people are you attracted to?) But when one is faced with the task of rebuilding a city, as the city fathers of Calais were, is it not right to approach that task with cost and speed at the forefront of one's thinking? Should those displaced by the bombing have been put into a tented village for sixteen years while a neoclassical wonderland was expensively and painstakingly assembled? If it was concrete that returned the people of Calais to their homes, schools, and workplaces more quickly and more affordably, then I salute it, no matter its ugliness. Solutions often lack beauty.

On the last ferry to Dover I went onto the viewing deck to enjoy the wind and the dark and to watch Calais recede. A Romanian asked me to take a photograph of him with the cliffs in the background. I told him it was too dark but he said it didn't matter because the cliffs would still be there. He was excited to be returning to England (where he was a student) and told me, after just a few minutes' conversation, that we are just little in this world and that it was not intelligent to think too much. I told him about Socrates, who said that the unexamined life wasn't worth living. 'His life was worth examining,' replied the Romanian, 'yours isn't.'

The Romanian was probably right, but up on that deck, passing through that channel, I couldn't help but examine things. In particular, what the hell I was up to travelling again. Bryson had a good reason – he wanted a final glance at Britain before returning to America – but what was my excuse? Was I feeding an addiction? Was I putting-off adulthood, with its manifold responsibilities?

Keen for an answer, I thought about Pascal, who held that the principal cause of man's restlessness is that he does not know how to stay quietly in his bedroom. It's easy to find

in Pascal's maxim the suggestion that contentment has much to do with sitting down, and thus that Pascal was writing in the pay of some furniture company with a batch of easy-chairs to shift. But to read Pascal in this way would be wrong. Instead, is he not simply pointing out that man is liable to wander because he routinely fails to notice the pleasures and complexities inherent in those things with which he is most familiar?

One guy read Pascal's celebration of staying-in perhaps a little too literally. In 1790, Xavier de Maistre spent nine months travelling in his bedroom, rejoicing in the room's hitherto unnoticed charms and associations: a busted mattress-spring, for example, brought to mind a particularly robust old flame. For me, then, Britain is a sort of bedroom. I was born and grew up in this bedroom. I think I know where the cupboard is and how the books are arranged. I know which corners gather most dust (the North) and I know which neighbour I can get a cup of sugar from (Surrey). I know all these things but I know them complacently – lazily – for I stopped paying attention to my bedroom a while ago; it had become so familiar that it no longer seemed to deserve attention. Was it not time, therefore, to take a look at those busted springs?

But why not take my own journey? Why copy Bryson? Was I not setting myself up for a fall by retracing the journey of a prize-winning writer when my only writing credit was a spell sub-editing *Family Fortunes*? Well, pragmatism certainly had something to do with it. First, copying is much easier than devising: not only would I not have to organise an itinerary, I wouldn't even have to decide what to eat each night: if Bill took a foot-long in Dover, so to say, then I would as well. Second, when the time came to send a few chapters across to the Publishing Industry – to whom I am depressingly unconnected – would my ripping-off-Bryson tactic not appeal to the Marketing Department? I could imagine snippets of the promotional junk: *Just like Bryson – but slimmer and not as funny!*

And if I'm honest for a second, I suppose I felt that a younger, less cosy, more British perspective on this small island might not be the worst thing in the world.

Back inside the ferry, I had a beer with a guy from Millwall, east London, who had that day picked up some cabinets from Stuttgart, with the intention of getting them to Kidderminster by midnight. I asked whether people from Millwall deserve the reputation of being aggressive and menacing, referring implicitly to a recent football match during which the Millwall fans had rioted. He told me that he'd been supporting Millwall since childhood (his father had inducted him) and that things had been relatively peaceful for years. At the match in question, he explained, two families with a chequered history (both alike in dignity), had been allocated seats next to each other, and that an unfortunate remark about an ex-wife, who was said to now be dating a notorious publican, had not gone down well with someone in row DD. The point he wanted to stress was that the violence at the match was not mindless – that it had its own logic – and in this way it was unlike, and less contemptible than, the violence of the 80s, when hooligans were liable to kick-off no matter who the publican was dating. He was a big guy so I took his word for it.

And then I was in Dover.

When Bryson first stayed here, back in 1973, he slept in a bus shelter with underpants on his head. He had tried to secure a bed at a guest house, but was thwarted by the lateness of his arrival and the slightness of his budget. A short walk from the ferry terminal took me to Marine Parade, where I found Bill's shelter. I took out my copy of *Notes from a Small Island* and read about the sound of Dover's waves and the turning beam of the lighthouse, and about a dog pissing on all upright things while its owner prophesied that the weather would turn out fine, in spite of all signs to the contrary. Earlier that day, amid London's anxious crowds – who were being herded here and there by unseen shepherds – I had felt lonely and sad. And yet, in a beautiful paradox, here I was, actually

alone, in a bus shelter, in Dover, at midnight, on the cusp of two months mimicking a slightly overweight guy from Iowa, unquestionably happy.

I found a room at a nearby guest house. After a small commotion with a cat on the stairs, I spent a pleasant twenty minutes watching the back-end of an erotic thriller that, in spite of the efforts of its cast, was neither erotic nor thrilling. I fell asleep to the sound of lorries rolling out of ferries, each carrying something, each going somewhere: pencils to Swindon, cabbage to the West Riding. I liked my bedroom.

In 1973, streaky bacon was one of the many things in Britain that Bryson had never heard of. Everything was strange and novel to Bryson, and thus that much easier to warm to. He liked the way the British used cutlery and called each other 'love' and 'mate'. He liked the way they ordered things by number ('twenty number six, please') and got excited about tea. Even those things that displeased or confused him had an enchanting effect – all was improved by the gloss of novelty.

At breakfast the next morning, I wondered to what extent naivety is an asset to the traveller; whether my being a lifelong citizen of Britain would make me a worse chronicler of it. But then I remembered the French guy who travelled in his bedroom for nine months and found in familiar things special things hiding, and said to myself, with a mouthful of sausage, 'Fuck it, I'll take a look at Britain and I'll write what I see and feel and think, and that'll just have to do.'

In one sense, though, I certainly was naive. For someone planning to write a book that sought to compare Britain now with Britain in 1994, I knew worryingly little about Britain in 1994. Perhaps this is unsurprising, given that I was eight in 1994, when my interest in current affairs amounted to a sometime concern about whether Keith from around the corner was coming out to play. That said, I did know that Prince Charles gave up competitive polo in 1994 and that Great Britain, with typical restraint, won only two bronze

medals at the Winter Olympics in Norway, and reasoned that, as points of comparison, these would serve as well as any. And there was always the chance I'd do more research. After all, in my backpack there was a book about British demography since the 80s wherein, on page twenty-three, lay the dust of a once genuine intention to read the bloody thing.

Dover is a seaside town of 50,000 people who mostly pack salad or work for Brittany Ferries. I walked along Townwall Street, a busy and ugly relief road, one of many such roads I would see over the coming months, each busy relieving everyone of their peace of mind. At the local Leisure Centre – which looks as piteous and prison-like as every other leisure centre in the country – the receptionist fielded my question about swimming opportunities as if I had asked how many years I'd get for farting in her face.

I went up to Dover Castle, which is positioned, rather predictably, on high ground. (Does the National Trust not worry that by locating its attractions at such altitudes it risks deterring visitors?) At the entrance to the castle's grounds I was asked for twenty pounds.

'Can't I just have a look?'

'They all say that.'

'And then what do you say?'

'No.'

I cursed this woman's humanity and yearned aloud for the mindlessness of machinery, which can be easily circumvented or tricked to think that artichokes are bananas. Even at this early stage of my trip I couldn't afford to cough up twenty quid just to verify there was a castle up there. I had saved £1500 for ten weeks' travel. If I wanted to see such things as Dover Castle I would have to be flexible in my approach. Accordingly, at the rear of the castle's grounds, I hurdled a 4ft iron fence before making an awkward ascent up a bank matted with fallen leaves, at the top of which was a 30ft medieval wall, which wasn't on Google Maps.

Thwarted, I set-off instead to see the famous white cliffs.

After thirty minutes walking I encountered a pair of ramblers who told me to give up, that it was another few miles to the cliffs and that they weren't that good anyway. One of the pair was evidently related to Socrates, because without bidding she began a lecture on local fracking, local xenophobia, local salad packing, and local battle re-enactment. At the end of the lecture she took me by the shoulders: 'That'll teach you to talk to strangers.'

It started raining. I had a friend's cashmere jacket on and so hastened back along Upper Street and down Harold's Passage to Maison Dieu Road, where a community notice board announced nothing. On Castle Street I found the cinema (now closed) where Bill went in '73 to see *Suburban Wife Swap*, a film that taught him the phrases 'complete pillock' and 'quick shag against the cooker'. (There is surely someone who has been called the former for attempting the latter while a pudding baked.)

At Market Square, sheltering under the awning of a pumpkin stall, I learnt that in the 1500s pick-pockets had their ears nailed to a pillory in the square before being given a knife and left with the predicament. The square is bordered by contrasting architecture: slim elegant Georgian next to nonsense post-war chunks – the confused legacy of bombs and fads and unsteady budgets. In front of Burton Menswear a market stall promoted two-for-one fleeces on crude cardboard signs, and in front of the Orange mobile-phone store another stall hawked out-of-date Blackberries. At the Dover museum I was told about a Bronze Age boat that was found nearby. 'Where exactly?' I asked. 'Under Burger King'.

Bill hadn't given me much to do in Dover (an Italian meal, some quiet absorbing, a walk along Marine Parade) and so I lingered in the museum gift-shop choosing a postcard, hoping the rain would abate. I bought a postcard that depicted the quintessential features of Britain. If the postcard is to be believed, and there's no reason why it shouldn't be, life in Britain is mostly about cricket and seagulls.

I went to the Discovery Centre (formerly the White Cliffs Experience) where I discovered there was little to do except spend a quarter of an hour in the library, where I overheard a teenager asking for stories wherein ‘people got, like, emotionally fucked-up’. I walked Cannon and Biggin and High Streets and saw the thirteenth-century town hall, and then a medieval chapel bashfully tucked behind McDonald’s, where it gathered the wind-blown wrappers of quarter-pound cheeseburgers.

I took a photograph of Socrates. I hadn’t meant to, she just turned up in my viewfinder, waving like a madman. She inquired whether I’d join her for another seminar and a cup of hemlock. I kind of stood there dumbstruck for a few seconds, searching for a polite way to say no thanks because you bore the shit out of me, in which time she had pulled me inside a sandwich shop and ordered me a coffee and begun a new monologue about the difficulties faced by young people in the town. I asked a bookseller at a neighbouring table what he’d do with a spare afternoon in Dover. He said he’d probably start alphabetizing the Science-Fiction section.

I headed for the station; a London train was due in eight minutes. Hungry, I ordered a bacon roll from a burger-van outside the station.

‘How long will that take?’

‘Two minutes.’

Four minutes passed. ‘Is that done yet?’

‘Couple of minutes.’

‘I thought you said the whole thing took a couple of minutes?’

‘Well, theoretically, yeah.’

‘Theoretically? What the hell do you—’

I missed that train.