



Shortcuts

People | Observations | Curiosities

Tuesday September 6, 2005

Guardian

Lay off my Boro (pt XV)

"Thank God it's only on match days that we have to go into Middlesbrough. The place is an industrial town, pure and simple ... All you've got there is smoking chimneys." So said Middlesbrough's new £1.8m left-back Emanuel Pogatzetz at the weekend.

You can only imagine the headlines back in the 22-year-old's Austrian homeland: "Football club not in idyllic setting shock! Babbling brooks, flower-speckled meadows and apple-cheeked goatherds conspicuous by absence, says former-Graz star."

Maybe I'm being chippy on account of the fact that my grandfather worked at the synthetic ammonia plant at Billingham and my father at Cargo Fleet steelworks (I begged them both to get jobs as media analysts, but would they listen?) because I thought the vast majority of British football clubs were in urban working-class neighbourhoods. I certainly don't recall Anfield or Upton Park being surrounded by thatched cottages and duck ponds.

In another hold-the-front-page moment, Pogatzetz also revealed that Middlesbrough's players don't actually live in Middlesbrough, but outside it. Well, well. How unlike the situation at Tottenham, all of whose players live on the Seven Sisters Road, or Manchester United, where Sir Alex Ferguson insists that, like him, all new recruits settle in Trafford.

Please forgive my schoolboy sarcasm. You see, we are just two months short of the 10th anniversary of the first article I wrote defending my home town. On that occasion, the stir was created when Middlesbrough had the temerity to sign the Brazilian Footballer of the Year, Juninho. Newspapers across the land (though mainly in London) greeted the news by rushing to compare Redcar beach with the Copacabana (that Juninho was from Sao Paulo and not Rio de Janeiro hardly seemed to matter). As it turned out, the little Brazilian liked Teesside so much he returned to the Riverside at regular intervals.

Other foreign recruits were not so happy. And so, since then, I have been called into regular action. If nothing else it has helped my cash-flow. Mrs Emerson's description of Teesside as a "dark and terrible place", the grumbling of Fabrizio Ravanelli, the local girls being denounced as ugly by Slovakian international Szilard Nemeth (himself no oil painting) have all kept the cash chugging in. After a while, though, it wears you down.

So, finally (at least until the next time): is Middlesbrough beautiful? No it isn't. Why should it be? You don't expect a bricklayer to have hands like a ballerina's. And as for young Pogatzetz, well, if he really wanted a sporting career in a setting of rural grandeur, maybe he should have left football alone and become a skier instead.

Harry Pearson

To give or not to give

After the tsunami, the only dilemma most Britons faced about their response was how much they should give. After Hurricane Katrina, many are asking whether they should give anything at all.

It's not hard to see why. "Charity is cold in the multitude of possessions," wrote the poet Christopher Smart;

words that are even more true when that multitude belongs to those pleading for help. Charity is about the better off helping the worst off, not vice versa, and America is surely rich enough to look after itself.

But the problem is that the biggest victim of Katrina is not an abstract entity called the USA, but a generally poor, uninsured, marginalised sector of its population. Their country is rich, but they are not. "The greater the wealth, the thicker will be the dirt," said the economist JK Galbraith, and New Orleans is one of the dirtiest corners of the American economic machine. To deny the need of its people is like saying that because the lord of the manor's estate is thriving, his underpaid labourers must be doing all right too.

Some will protest that the US created its underclass and so should take responsibility for sorting out the mess that results when it suffers a catastrophe. You could equally say that many African famines have been caused by incompetent and corrupt governments, so we shouldn't clear up after them either. Most people who read this newspaper would find that line of reasoning abhorrent, yet when it's applied to poor black Americans, it suddenly seems far more seductive.

It's hard to escape the conclusion that there's a little bit of schadenfraude in all of this. We don't want to plug the gaping hole created by inegalitarian American social policy because we want to expose it for what it is, and shatter America's self-image as the most fair and free country in the world. All those years of Yankee sneering at the European social model have given us a point to prove.

If an appeal were launched that was targeted specifically at rebuilding the lives of poor Americans let down by their government, we might be quicker to open our wallets. Giving to that would not only help those who really don't have the resources to help themselves, it would also shame the US government by showing an American underclass relying on foreign charity. I'd kick-start such an appeal with my fee for this piece. Any takers?

Julian Baggini

The end of Orkney?

I've lived in the Orkneys since 1970, first on Hoy and now on the more distant island of Sanday. I came here because the people were so friendly and open. I loved the fact that you could leave your door open and there was no crime. But most of all, as a composer, I came for the quality of the silence.

Now, some Orcadians appear to be bored with living on these islands. There are proposals to build a tunnel across the Pentland Firth that will link the Orkneys with the Scottish mainland. I am not qualified to judge what the commercial benefits would be, but of one thing I am sure - it would not be island life any more.

These are the Orkney islands - that defines the whole character of the place. There is a wonderful atmosphere here. Tunnels would bring us that much closer to being like everywhere else. The mainland of Orkney would change out of all recognition and the population density would increase rapidly. A building boom might offer great commercial possibilities for some people, but what matters more - commercialism, or hanging on to the character of a place?

These days there is some crime in Kirkwall, the main town in Orkney, most of it related to drinking on a Friday or a Saturday night. But it's small beer compared with anywhere else in the UK. You can still leave your door or your car unlocked. If someone has committed credit-card fraud in Kirkwall, they can be caught at the ferry terminal or the airport. Build a tunnel and they'll have driven off the island before anything can be done.

I like to think that the plan is a non-starter. The costs will be prohibitive and, as we know from the Channel Tunnel, the initial estimate of £100m for the project is sure to escalate. It would be much more constructive giving all 18,000 inhabitants of the Orkneys £1m each.

So let's hope that the tunnels are never dug. I've been to Skye since the bridge was built, and heaven preserve us from that. They are now completely swamped by tourists. I don't suppose the tunnel network will ever be extended to Sanday - who would bother building a tunnel for the 500 of us who live here? But if it was, I would be forced to move.

Peter Maxwell Davies

- Sir Peter Maxwell Davies is master of the Queen's music. He was talking to Stephen Moss.

Building a better anthem

Am I the only person to feel a sense of embarrassment that England doesn't have its own national anthem? Watching the teams line up before the World Cup qualifier in Cardiff on Saturday, I couldn't help but be moved by the home crowd's stirring rendition of the Welsh national anthem, Hen Wlad fy Nhadau. By contrast, God Save the Queen just made me cringe. Not because of the monarchist sentiments implied, nor because I abhor any displays of patriotic fervour. It's just not our national anthem.

Which is why a scheme to get the Oval singing Jerusalem before the final Ashes Test this week might not be a bad idea. Whichever way you look at it, God Save the Queen is the national anthem of Great Britain. Once it was sung by the Welsh and the Scots before international sporting events too, but like the union flag, the British national anthem didn't truly reflect who they were. So they found a more suitable song instead. The sky didn't fall in, they just had the confidence to be themselves, secure in the knowledge that they would still be British.

Just as the English have, over the past decade, begun to feel more themselves under the flag of St George, perhaps the time is coming when we too will have our own national anthem. There are plenty of songs to choose from: Rule Britannia, Land of Hope and Glory, The Dambusters theme and Swing Low Sweet Chariot are already heard whenever a national sporting event occurs. However, none of these songs actually mentions the name of our country, a somewhat fatal flaw when selecting an anthem.

There is only one song that mentions England, is short yet stirring and - importantly - well known enough to be sung in unison by thousands, and that is William Blake's Jerusalem. With its opening line of "And did those feet, in ancient time", the song is ideal for sporting events, evoking WG Grace walking out to the crease or Bobby Moore leading England on to Wembley in 1966.

Npower, sponsor of the Ashes series, has taken it upon itself to ask the entire country to sing the song together before this Thursday's match. I'll be breaking the habit of a lifetime by tuning in to a cricket match, if only to see a bit of history being made - an England team proudly singing its own national anthem. And who knows, I might even stick around to watch the game.

Billy Bragg

· Billy Bragg is a contributor to Jerusalem: An anthem for England on BBC4 this Thursday at 9.10pm.

Guardian Unlimited © Guardian News and Media Limited 2006