



## England, my England

In his quest to define Englishness, singer-songwriter Billy Bragg rejects John Major's vision of warm beer and cricket and searches for clues in the miners' strike and his great-great-great grandfather

**Sean O'Hagan**  
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### Observer

Twenty-three years ago, Billy Bragg released a song called 'A New England'. Its title, however, turned out to be oddly misleading. It wasn't about identity and belonging, but jaded romance. 'I don't want to change the world,' ran the chorus, 'I'm not looking for New England/ I'm just looking for another girl.'

Now 48, happily married and having spent a considerable amount of time and energy trying to change the world through his politically motivated pop songs, Bragg has actually gone looking for his new England. And written a book about it. It is called *The Progressive Patriot: A Search for Belonging* (Bantam Press) and it places Bragg in the somewhat unlikely company of Jeremy Paxman and Roger Scruton, both of whom have recently written books about what it means to be an Englishman in the modern world.

Bragg's notion of Englishness, as one might have guessed from his lyrics and long-term activism, differs radically from Scruton's. For a start, it is not built on nostalgia. Nor is it threatened by immigration, multiculturalism or Europe.

'The first thing I want to say is that my book doesn't really belong to that genre of white middle-aged men of a certain class complaining about what it used to be like in some so-called golden age,' he says, combatively. He also departs from the norm by not taking anything for granted when it comes to defining his identity.

'It struck me that everyone who writes about being British bangs on about "British values". Just like the politicians do. Well, one of the things I try to ascertain in the book is what exactly those values are. Can we define them or even name three or four of them? And where are they written down? Basically, I'm rooting around in history and in the here and now trying to define why I feel patriotic, which I do.'

I tell him I was surprised by the book's title, adhering as I do to Dr Johnson's edict that patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel. 'Well, I love my country,' he counters, 'therefore I'm a patriot. Also, the more I prodded "Englishness", the more it fell apart like a straw man. I had to go somewhere else, and patriotism seemed to me essentially what I was writing about. For me, the notion of belonging is certainly bound up in that. It seemed honest to acknowledge that, and, besides, I wanted to surprise people who thought they knew me.'

Bragg has dedicated the book to his musical heroes, the Clash, but one senses that the real motivating force behind it is Orwell, whose essay 'The Lion and the Unicorn: Socialism and the English Genius' is referred to more than once. It was that same essay on which John Major built his now infamous anti-European Union speech in 1993, extolling the national characteristics as 'long shadows on county [cricket] grounds, warm beer, invincible green suburbs, dog lovers and pools fillers and, as George Orwell said, old maids bicycling to Holy Communion through the morning mist'.

Bragg points out that Orwell's original vision of Britishness was, unlike Major's, extraordinarily contemporary rather than unrealistically nostalgic. Alongside the old maids on wheels, it also included 'lorries on the Great North Road' and 'the queues outside the labour exchange'. Bragg's book, too, is a paean to contemporary England in all its turbulent richness.

'I love my country but not in the way that Roger Scruton or Peter Hitchens do, which is based on a single idea that is stuck in the past somewhere. My England is not just the past, it's the here and now. History resonates. It's all around us and it's always there, whether I am walking up to the Roman hill fort near where I was brought up in Barking or wandering through the streets of Soho today. I can feel it now, I don't long to go back to any other time.'

I tell him that his efforts to reclaim the flag of St George didn't quite win me over, given that it has different connotations for those of us raised in Northern Ireland. 'That's why it's important we reclaim it,' he replies, 'which I think we have. When the St George flag is waved in Trafalgar Square when we win the Ashes, it means one thing: this is who we are. This is our team and this is what they look like. One is a Sikh, one is a Muslim. It's interesting that Peter Hitchens hates the idea that the 11 young men in the football team represent England, but could you ever come up with 11 young men who look more like us?'

I'll say one thing for Billy Bragg - he could talk for England. His ideas are essentially left-of-centre humanist, but he has a tendency to throw them at you one after the other, in the manner of trades union leaders or old-school Labourites. Writing the book, he says, was 'like climbing a bloody mountain', but it often reads like a walk in the perilous foothills of history, culture and personal memoir, where every path, however slippery, must not be left untrodden - and yet none is fully explored. Unless you surrender to Bragg's discursive-going-on-tangential style, and the book's big leaps from the personal to the sociopolitical, the walk can prove exhausting and not a little frustrating.

There is less autobiography than I expected, too; no mention, for instance, of his stint in the army as a young man, an experience that must surely have afforded him an insight into an extreme version of British patriotism. 'It didn't really seem relevant that I was in the army for a bit,' he says, unconvincingly, when I mention this. 'The autobiographical things I put in there were selected purely to serve the book's argument.'

Perhaps this is why *The Progressive Patriot* often reads like two books welded together: one, a memoir, the other a wide-ranging meditation on belonging. I much preferred the personal journey. When he writes about Simon & Garfunkel's rendition of the traditional 'Scarborough Fair', for instance, and how it was the first pop record that ignited his sense of Englishness, you are offered a rare insight into the often accidental, but often life-changing, resonances of the pivotal pop song. 'Those two Jewish guys from New York had opened my mind to the beauty and power of my own native culture ...'

His potted history of punk and the Rock Against Racism movement, though, nearly had me nodding off and seemed to belong in a different book: *Political Pop for Beginners*, maybe.

Bragg's biggest epiphany came during the researching of the book, when he discovered his east London ancestors were Baptists, part of the dissenting tradition mapped out by Christopher Hill in his wonderful book *The World Turned Upside Down*. That same book inspired the left-wing folk song of the same name by Leon Rosselson, later covered by Bragg during the turbulent days of the miners' strike in the mid-Eighties.

'I always felt instinctively that I came from the dissenting tradition,' says Bragg, smiling, 'and then to find out that my great-great-great grandfather, George Bragg, preached in the fields and refused to sit behind the squire in church - that was a great moment. The way I see it, if fairness is the central value of Britishness, then the so-called dissenters who demanded it and fought for it are the central core of Britishness.'

This is the kind of thing I wanted more of, a way of illustrating all the bigger themes through his singular personal journey. That said, *The Progressive Patriot* is a brave and often illuminating attempt to untangle a subject that, more often than not, is clothed in nostalgia, class snobbery or veiled racism. And when was the last time you read a book where Kipling rubs shoulders with Joe Strummer?

## **Billy can**

**Born** 20 December 1957, Barking, Essex.

**Career** Formed punk band Riff Raff aged 19. Joined the Queen's Royal Irish Hussars in 1981, but four months later bought his way out for £175.

**Select discography**

Life's a Riot With Spy Vs Spy (1983)

Brewing up With Billy Bragg (1984)

Talking With the Taxman About Poetry (1986)

Workers Playtime (1988)

England, Half-English (2002)

**What you need to know**

- He got into the office of a record company executive by pretending to be a TV repair man.
- He rushed a mushroom biryani round to John Peel's studio when the DJ complained of feeling hungry on air. Peel subsequently played Bragg's record.
- The opening lines of 'A New England' ('I was 21 years when I wrote this song/ I'm 22 now, but I won't be for long') are taken from Simon & Garfunkel's 'Leaves That Are Green' in an act of homage.
- He is an avid West Ham United fan, though he now lives in Dorset.

**The Progressive Patriot is published by Bantam Press on 12 October, £17.99**

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