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# The Progressive Patriot by Billy Bragg

## Old Big Nose takes on the BNP

By Mark Perryman

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Billy Bragg has built a career out of his dogged belief that wearing badges is not enough. Whether he's singing for striking miners or stop the war marchers, the passion of his protest is never in doubt. What has fooled and sometimes offended his fans though, has been his curious combination of the romantic and the patriotic.

Never shy of declaring his lack of shame in flying the flag for England, Bragg champions a dissenting tradition in Englishness he believes we ignore at our contemporary peril. The Progressive Patriot is his attempt to give substance and direction to these twin ideals, an excursion given added impetus by the BNP's spectacular capture of 12 council seats in Barking's 2006 local elections. Born and bred in this Essex town, "the bard of Barking" suddenly found himself the cheerleader for a place he no longer knew.

The book kicks off with an investigation of Barking's ancient past, going back to Roman times via Iron Age forts and Saxon burial mounds. There is one historical unearthing after another. Mixed up with his outright indignation at how the BNP are in danger of taking over his hometown, his argument can on occasion confuse, but there remains a vital trail that Bragg expertly pursues. The purity of nationhood is never quite what it seems. Layer upon layer of invasion, imported and exported customs, migration, empire and war each make a contribution, and those who seek to privilege one contribution over another are simply using this as a cover for their own prejudice, discrimination and wilful ignorance.

On stage Billy Bragg is a passionate performer, mixing wit and righteous anger in equal measure. His writing is at its best when it reflects this fervour. Having discovered Barking's rich heritage, Bragg investigates his own family tree. Strikers, Italian immigrants, nonconformists, he finds the lot. The BBC has turned this kind of thing into another version of self-serving celebfest TV, but Bragg's purpose is quite different. He is determined to prove that England's past is completely at odds with the conservative nation we too readily assume it always has been, and forever will be. He accomplishes this task with considerable flair. Well-read historians may be familiar with some of the episodes he recounts but most readers won't be, and it is the ambition of reconstruction that makes his writing so special.

When he mixes this rediscovery of local and family history with an account of his adolescent love affair with music, the book excels. As a teenager he listened to Simon and Garfunkel, then Dylan, followed by the Clash and punk. Bragg doesn't leave it there though; he uncovers the very English influences on Simon, Dylan, and though he doesn't mention him, he could have added Hendrix too. The point is never stretched, but the argument remains the same: English pop culture, like the English nation, is porous and giving. This is its true essence and fascination.

The impact of World War Two and in particular the Blitz, his father's wartime service, Churchill's speeches and George Orwell's 1941 essay "The Lion and the Unicorn", are central to Bragg's valuation of the patriotic. He dismisses those who would claim this period for Europhobia and the imperiousness of racism; rather he detects a solidarity and sacrifice that outlasts such prejudices. His cataloguing of the hidden contribution by servicemen of what would have then been the empire is both striking and moving, but doesn't come at the expense of recognising what those closer to home gave, including their lives.

Bragg's case for a progressive patriotism is founded on these various past histories. What remains unclear is how any future British state can accommodate an English nation. Bragg cannot really be faulted for this. While new Labour's 1997 constitutional settlement delivered a Scottish Parliament and a Welsh Assembly, nobody in Westminster seemed much bothered with where England fits in. Locating the agencies and forms for an Englishness proud of itself, at ease with neighbours, at home and abroad and with a nation to call its own will take exactly what Billy Bragg has always stood for and sung about. Wearing badges was never enough and nor is flying flags.

*Mark Perryman is the author of 'Ingerland: Travels with a Football Nation' (Simon & Schuster £10.99)*

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