

A warrior for the working day

Last Updated: 12:01am GMT 29/10/2006

Daniel Hannan reviews *The Progressive Patriot: A Search for Belonging* by Billy Bragg

There are good reasons for Lefties to be proud of this country. Britain has an indigenous radical tradition that, at its best, is elevated and inspiring - the tradition of the Levellers and the Chartists, of Tom Paine and Mary Wollstonecraft. The Guardian has recently been running a magnificent campaign to commemorate some of the sacred sites of the Left, such as St Peter's Fields in Manchester, where workers demanding the right to vote were ridden down by armed hussars, and Epsom Downs racecourse, where Emily Davison was killed. I'll bet that even the most high-minded Guardianista feels a little twinge of patriotism when he thinks of these places.

Yet, as George Orwell used to complain, there is also a masochistic element in the English Left: a readiness to ally with any cause, however vile, provided it is sufficiently Anglophobic, from the Soviet Union to the IRA. Happily, this second tendency seems to be in decline. Many bien pensant commentators who used to flinch whenever they saw someone flying the national flag now talk unselfconsciously of the need to reclaim it.

advertisement One such is Billy Bragg. In the 1980s, the former punk singer was the driving force behind Red Wedge, a campaign to persuade young people to vote Labour. These days, he writes articles in The Daily Telegraph about the nativity play in his sleepy Dorset village. I don't mean that he is any less Left-wing; just more rounded. Where the young Bragg used to write lyrics about fighting fascists, the mature one wrote the music for an RSC production of Henry V that left us misty-eyed in the stalls.

Just the man, then, to limn the story of English radicalism from the Peasants' Revolt to the Miners' Strike. Bragg has all the right qualifications. His forebears sprang from the flatlands of East Anglia, and were steeped in that region's tradition of religious and political dissent. His great-grandfather was a dockworker, and one of the first generation of trade union agitators. Billy himself came to politics through Rock Against Racism in the 1970s.

The trouble is, he keeps getting distracted. His book is an unstructured mélange of autobiography, genealogy, cultural criticism and polemic. Bragg is at his best on home ground. There are engaging passages about his family's experiences during the two wars - although, curiously, no mention of Billy's own time in the Army. There is a fascinating essay about the English roots of American folk music. There is a touching picture of the young Billy listening to some girls singing Simon and Garfunkel's Scarborough Fair at a school assembly, and drifting into the sweet melancholy that is at the root of patriotic sentiment. There is a brilliant chapter about Billy's native town of Barking, which, under his loving pen, comes across as one of the most magical sites in England.

When he strays on to bigger themes, though, Bragg is less convincing. His history is tendentious, and often inaccurate ("the Stuarts were Scottish Catholics"). His central proposition seems sound enough. "If there is a single trait in our character that has historically set us apart from other nations," he writes, "it is our determination to limit the authority of those who rule over us". Amen. But Bragg does not distinguish between positive and negative freedoms. He traces an unbroken line from Magna Carta and the Bill of Rights through to the Beveridge Report and the 1998 Human Rights Act. Yet there is surely a difference between the first two charters, which were concerned with liberty - that is, with guaranteeing the individual against state coercion - and the latter two, which were about entitlement, and which thus enlarged "the authority of those who rule over us".

Still, Bragg is right to see patriotism as a dynamic, even revolutionary force. It is precisely this dynamism that makes our national identity accessible. Billy's villein ancestors were not covered by the chief provisions of Magna Carta; but he is in no doubt that it is part of his heritage. The same could be said, with equal justice, by someone whose ancestors were not living in England at the time. For the genius of England, and later Britain, was to favour a civic over an ethnic definition of nationality.

Twice in the past century, this ideal found superb vindication in the millions of Empire and Commonwealth volunteers who were prepared to cross half the world in order to take up arms for a country they had never seen, because they believed in what it stood for. That is something of which Left and Right can be equally proud.

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