

Reformers Target Great Britain's History/Landscape

by Suzanne Fields

There'll always be an England, and that's a comfort in a world whirling ever faster with change. We all need verities to hang on to.

The English invented wackiness, and the little old lady in tennis shoes, always thought to have originated in Pasadena, actually immigrated to California from England. There's new proof.

A formal government body, the Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain, has delivered itself of recommendations on how to fix what may, or may not, be broke in British society, and it could only have sprung from the head of an English relative of that famous little old lady in Pasadena.

Kate Gavron is the wife of Lord Gavron, who contributed more than a million dollars to the Labor Party in the election that put Tony Blair in as prime minister. So Lady Gavron was appointed vice chairman of the commission to find out what it means to be English, and maybe even British. Not much, the commission learned.

You could have fooled some of us. We've always associated

Suzanne Fields is distributed by the Los Angeles Times Syndicate.

England with Shakespeare, the Magna Carta, Lord Nelson and Trafalgar and all that. If you throw in the *King James Bible* and the *Oxford English Dictionary* of the language of the race of kings, pretty soon you're talking about a pretty impressive bit of the legacy of Western civilization. And I haven't even mentioned Monty Python, Benny Hill, Fawcety Towers and the Beatles.

But no. Britain must "revise, rethink or jettison" its history because much of it is bad and might hurt the feelings of a newcomer. Members of minorities were left out of a lot of the history (probably because they were not around at the time), and Britons should henceforth regard themselves not as a community, but as a "community of communities." Britons, "who never shall be slaves," should henceforth refrain from even regarding themselves as British, because the very word has "racist connotations." And "English" is even worse, how much worse you don't want to know.

Lady Gavron has a nifty idea for making race relations smooth overnight. "It would be great," she told the London *Daily Telegraph*, "if Prince Charles had been told to marry someone black, imagine what that message would have sent out."

We can't imagine. If the prince, or anyone else, wants to marry

someone black, or pink or green, you might think a lady, particularly a "Lady," would not expect him to conform to a quota system in such intimate affairs of the heart. Besides, why should a black, pink or green woman feel good about a marriage designed to make her feel white? That's racist, not romantic, it seems to me.

"We need to acknowledge that there are different ways of looking at history," Lady Gavron says. "The problem with the empire was the inequality of power. It was something we did to the Indians and Africans, not with them."

It's not clear what the Indians and Africans think of all this, but we can imagine. Like all immigrants, they left their homes in search of a better life, and probably thought Britain, bad history, Shakespeare, the Magna Carta, the Beatles and all, was a good place to look for it.

Lady Gavron seems sympathetic in spite of herself, up to a point. She doesn't want to give up her husband's title, of course. She rails about the peerage, but only the hereditary peerage, which her husband's is not. His title will die with him.

"We should keep the name Trafalgar Square. If you got rid of everything bad you would have nothing at all. We'd have to start losing the Norman names, too, if we

were being purist. I love the hymns, such as 'Jerusalem' and 'I Vow to Thee My Country.' I am embarrassed by the words, but the music is wonderful," she says.

Ordinarily, no one would be obliged to treat any of this as anything more than the daydreams of eccentrics with their arteries going hard and with nothing to do at teatime. But some people in London have been acting a little strange lately.

A year ago consultants urged British Airways to jettison the Union Jack emblem on its jetliners because Britain ought to quit thinking of itself as a nation and regard itself as a "brand," like Coca-Cola. And the government did pay for this new study and is trying to appear to be taking it seriously.

What this may mean is that political correctness, like most

American cultural junk, has taken a long time to cross the Atlantic. The British often get American stuff slightly askew, as any visitor to London who has wandered into the Old Kentucky Pancake House looking for old Kentucky pancakes, or Wimpy's looking for a hamburger that Wimpy would recognize, could tell you. Maybe we should just take it as entertainment. While we still can. •