

WHO'S AFRAID OF ARTHUR BRYANT?

A ONCE-BELOVED HISTORIAN,
THREE DECADES ON

R. J. Stove

A related inquiry: who *was* Arthur Bryant, anyhow?

If you are an Englishman, a Welshman, a Scot, a Canadian, or an Australian of less than retirement age—or an American of any age—your response to that query could well be “No idea.” If, on the other hand, you were born before World War II within Britain’s erstwhile empire, you possess a good chance of having often seen Bryant’s name in print as you were growing up.

During the twentieth century’s middle decades, Arthur Wynne Morgan Bryant’s books and articles on English historical themes—of which he was probably his homeland’s most popular living exponent—provided literary sustenance to veritable hordes in the United Kingdom. And not only there. Every week, latterly every month, during my own youth (divided between Oxfordshire and New South Wales), the long since terminated magazine *Illustrated*

London News—Brit diaspora culture’s golden thread—brought within its covers an essay by Bryant.

Born in 1899, Bryant had been writing those essays in that periodical from 1936, when he took over as the *ILN*’s chief columnist from Chesterton; and he continued turning them out until his own death in 1985. (Chesterton he cherished, despite conspicuous religious differences between Chesterton the eventual Catholic and Bryant the life-long Protestant. Introducing a posthumously published [1955] collection of GKC’s articles, Bryant opined: “If any literary name of our age becomes a legend transcending letters, it will, I believe, be [Chesterton’s] . . . I never met a more generous man, and I never saw a happier.” He also called Belloc, in 1940, “the most versatile of all living prose writers. Now that Hardy, Kipling, Galsworthy, and Chesterton are dead, he is undoubtedly one of the three or four greatest.”)

R. J. Stove lives in Melbourne, Australia, and is the author of *César Franck: His Life and Times*.

Very well, this could be interesting, but even 1985 was a generation back, and has Bryant anything worthwhile for audiences in 2016? Never mind who's afraid of Arthur Bryant; who *cares* about Arthur Bryant? Should we?

Answers to these questions lie in a deeply impressive English survey, itself a decade old, by Dr. Julia Stapleton, from the University of Durham. *Sir Arthur Bryant and National History in Twentieth-Century Britain* (2006) is not a conventional biography or, indeed, a biography of any sort. For instance, we learn from it almost nothing about Bryant's two marriages, or the motives that persuaded the octogenarian to plan a third marriage only months before he perished. What Dr. Stapleton does, with unflinching rectitude, is map the contours of Bryant's creative mind: one with solid attainments, mostly occurring before television had made more than a marginal impact on British life.

The tributes that Bryant gained from across the political spectrum, including a 1954 knighthood and (thirteen years afterward) the far rarer privilege of being made a Companion of Honor, came from Churchill and from Stanley Baldwin—perhaps predictable sympathizers, in view of Bryant's instinctive, nondoctrinaire Toryism—but also from Labour leaders, above all Clement Attlee, Harold Wilson, and Michael Foot. His full-length studies sold between two and three million copies altogether, and the royalties they brought in enabled him to bequeath an estate of £779,352 (roughly \$895,000 in 1985 U.S. dollars), which is at least £779,000 more than most of us scribblers will ever acquire through *our* royalties. A man, it is clear, who (to paraphrase Chesterton's celebrated aphorism about Dickens) not only knew what the public wanted but

wanted what the public wanted. What might that have been?

Perhaps it can be summed up in an epigram by Faulkner, of whom Bryant probably knew nothing: "The past isn't dead. It's not even past." Bryant was a congenital historian in the same broad sense that Michael Phelps is a congenital swimmer. He had an unusually keen discernment of the continuities, as well as of the chasms, in British history. Somehow the voices of this history's protagonists seemed to reverberate within his very being. It is hard to say this without sounding like a babbling sentimentalist, like an ectoplasm-stained medium, or like both. All the same, it happens to be true.

More imaginative empathy would have been no use to Bryant, of course, without scholarship. That he had, largely through autodidactic reading rather than through his formal—and, one gathers from Dr. Stapleton, personally unsatisfying—Oxford education. Few can have matched Bryant in his ability to internalize all the major primary sources in British politics, and most of the nonpolitical sources then available, from the Norman Conquest onward. (On Continental sources he was less assured, but still, as far as I have been able to ascertain, competent.) He did not disdain to adopt the vocation of those whom Stalin, with characteristic pleasantries, called "archive rats." When you add to this diligence in research a Chestertonian gusto, an equally Chestertonian common sense, an ability to comprehend the wishes and fears of people very different in temperament and social class from himself, and a fondness for the most muscular subject-plus-predicate sentences, you find yourself thinking after exposure to Bryant's best work: "This man can *write*."

What impressed such a conclusion on me, long after my youth, was discovering Bryant's

The Years of Endurance, 1793–1802 (1942): volume 1 of his Napoleonic Wars trilogy. (Volumes 2 and 3 are called, respectively, *The Years of Victory* and *The Age of Elegance*.) The study has unmistakable drawbacks. There is too simple an equation—maybe the circumstances of 1942 made the equation inevitable—between Napoleon and Hitler; between the Younger Pitt and Churchill; between the “appeaser” Charles James Fox and Neville Chamberlain. (Bryant is on stronger ground in pointing out parallels between the Duce and Spain’s prime minister Manuel Godoy. The Godoy-Mussolini correspondences many times startle: rise to national leadership before the age of forty; frantic skirt-chasing; self-congratulatory memoirs; a penchant for being too clever by half; eventual reduction to stooge level by a tougher ally.) And yes, Bryant’s invocations of British moral fiber can become wearing in an epoch that has been taught to associate British national pride with soccer hooligans, usually plastered, sometimes homicidal.

Against all this—and far outweighing it in importance—is Bryant’s nonchalant handling of material only with difficulty tractable: the jockeying between Foxite Whigs and, on the other hand, the Whigs who eventually sided with Pitt and Burke; the far gorier jockeying among the Jacobins; the Vendée uprisings and their pitiless suppression (how many other twentieth-century British historians deigned to transcend their own parochialism by discovering the Vendéens at all?); the on-again-off-again British alliances with Austria and Russia; and the battle scenes.

Was it Belloc who said that the two hardest things to depict in words are the course of a battle and the tying of a knot? Here, regardless, is Bryant on the Battle of the Nile, 1798. He enables readers to smell

the blood and the gunpowder, to hear the screams of the wounded:

Wrought to the highest tension by their long, tenacious pursuit, the British fought, as [Captain Sir Edward] Berry put it, with an ardor and vigor impossible to describe. The French also fought with great gallantry. Captain Dupetit Thouars of the *Tonnant*, after losing both arms and a leg, had his dying trunk placed in a tub on the quarterdeck where he refused to strike his colors though every mast was gone and every gun disabled. But the British were fighting with the certain conviction of victory and, every man knowing what to do in all emergencies, with an order and freedom from confusion absent in the Republican ships. Early in the engagement, when the issue was already a foregone conclusion, Nelson was struck on the forehead by a piece of flying iron from the *Spartiate*’s langridge. Flung to the deck and blinded by the strip of bleeding flesh that fell over his solitary eye, he was carried below thinking himself a dying man. Here in the crowded cockpit he lay in intense pain, insisting on taking his turn at the surgeon with the other wounded men and constantly calling with what he believed to be his dying breath for news of the battle. Once he bade Berry hail the *Minotaur*, anchored ahead of the *Vanguard*, that he might thank Captain Louis for his conduct before he died. Already three enemy ships had struck and three more were disabled, and with his brain wandering a little he endeavored to dictate a dispatch to the Admiralty. His secretary was too overwrought to write, so the blinded man took the pen himself and with trembling hand traced the words: “Almighty God has blessed His Majesty’s arms.”

Tours de force like this serve to make *The Years of Endurance* the sort of book one reads compulsively on every train, on every bus, in every line while waiting at the supermarket, and wherever the opportunity to absorb a few more pages presents itself. Part of it derives from the irresistible momentum of an epic, a momentum which ensures that although Bryant's aversion to Bonaparte is conspicuous, his fairness toward the French high command is equally so. As Dorothy L. Sayers once pointed out: "You cannot have an epic in which all the heroic qualities are on one side."

Surely a man who could handle the English language with the above level of flexible ease deserved better than to have his entire output calumniated. Which only goes to show how easy it is to underrate Andrew Roberts, authorized apple polisher to the Blair-Bush diarchy, who devoted an entire chapter of his 1994 philippic *Eminent Churchillians* to dismissing Bryant with nagging abuse. We are asked to believe, by Roberts—not only in this diatribe but in the manic missives with which he later bombarded (stalked?) luckless editors at the *Times Literary Supplement* and the *Salisbury Review* on the topic—that Bryant was "a Nazi sympathizer and fascist fellow-traveler, who only narrowly escaped internment as a potential traitor in 1940. He was also, incidentally, a supreme toady, fraudulent scholar and humbug." Let us leave aside the interesting problem of how appropriate the words "supreme toady" and "fraudulent scholar" are when coming from, of all individuals, Roberts. Let us ask the simple question: was Bryant guilty as charged?

Frankly, no.

Dr. Stapleton has effectively seen off the charge of fraud, which Roberts leveled at Bryant's three-volume biography of Samuel

Pepys. (During the 1930s, Bryant made himself into something of a seventeenth-century specialist. His life of Charles II—a pioneering if flawed attempt to rescue Charles from one hundred years of Whig execration—comes from 1931.) Roberts accused Bryant of taking credit for work actually done by one Joseph R. Tanner, who had died in the year that *King Charles II* emerged. In fact, as Dr. Stapleton demonstrates, Bryant toiled far too much over the basic material Tanner had supplied (the intermediary between Tanner and Bryant being Macaulay's great-nephew G. M. Trevelyan) for any suggestion of corrupt intellectual practice, let alone plagiarism, to be tenable. Even if Bryant had not so toiled, it strains credulity to imagine that any bad behavior by Bryant would have escaped his initial reviewers. Bryant was then a tyro, with nothing in the way of a scholarly reputation. Carelessness that he—or any other historian—might have indulged in as a Grand Old Man without ill effect would have ruined an Englishman of letters in 1933 near the start of his career.

English literary tricksters in the period between the wars incurred severe punishment, if not at the law's hands, then through public odium. (At around the time of Bryant's début, bookseller T. J. Wise was permanently disgraced—he avoided jail—for his fake "first editions." In 1928 an English musicologist named Arthur Eaglefield Hull, unable to refute or indeed deny the crushing evidence of his authorial thefts, jumped under an oncoming train.) By implying that the young Bryant could have cheated with impunity—even if he had somehow wished to do so—Roberts is simply extrapolating from his own age's postmodern tolerance of literary swindles. It is a tolerance that has conspicuously benefited such Nobel laureates as Rigoberta Menchú, and that is invoked afresh whenever a tenth-rate educrat

defends plagiarism for “empowering” some minoritarian ethnic or sexual goon squad.

The “Nazi sympathizer and fascist fellow-traveler” charge against Bryant is both more dramatic than the fraud charge and superficially more justifiable. Amid the “phony war,” Bryant issued a study of Hitler’s Reich entitled *Unfinished Victory*. Very hard to find now (the *cheapest* used edition visible in a recent search on Bookfinder.com was being offered for \$72.47), *Unfinished Victory* was a commercial and critical failure at the time, and Bryant—quickly rather embarrassed by what undoubtedly constitutes his least convincing book—allegedly bought up as many copies as possible of the sole edition that ever appeared.

It is safe to assume that Roberts never actually read *Unfinished Victory* himself (possibly he persuaded some graduate student to harvest quotes from it). Had he bothered to peruse it with any attention, he would have noticed that the book describes German Jews as having “often conferred, especially in the realms of learning, science, and medicine, the greatest distinction on their adopted country”; that it calls Nazi persecution “revolting and sickening”; and that it refers to Hitler’s racial theory as “repulsive gibberish, his ambitions barbarous and ridiculous, his motives cruel and sadistic.” None of which can have made for agreeable reading in Berlin. A letter by Bryant to *The Times* in 1939 had condemned the “barbarous act” of Germany invading Poland; in private correspondence Bryant had referred sarcastically to the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact as “the inspiring and truly Christian example set us by Hitler and Stalin.”

Bryant had also uttered sharp criticisms of Jewish profiteers and communists from the Weimar Republic. Furthermore, like most other people born during the nineteenth

century’s second half (notably Churchill, in a famous *Illustrated London Herald* article from 1920), Bryant felt no compunction about admitting the predominant racial makeup of pre-Stalin Bolshevism. He did not like his Jewish contemporaries overmuch. Few upper-middle-class gentile Englishmen of his generation did. That is completely different from saying that he favored violence against Jews, or that he welcomed national-socialist ideology in any but the mildest, wariest, most limited fashion. Apart from any other factors, a writer prone to agitated encomia of Disraeli is scarcely the standard-issue, blood-and-soil, invasion-of-the-giant-lizards anti-Semite.

For Bryant, as it was for nearly all men his age, the Great War had been life’s formative experience. Limited though his military service had been, he had never forgotten—let alone lost—his antagonism to the Treaty of Versailles, and his belief, whether warranted or no, that only a just peace with Germany would prevent another and worse conflagration. (Neither a pacifist nor a follower of Oswald Mosley, Bryant favored British rearmament, and would almost certainly have supported British intervention in 1936 on Franco’s side if either Baldwin or Chamberlain had seriously entertained this intervention as a possibility.) Moreover, there remained the uncomfortable fact of German jobless rates having shrunk, under Hitler, to almost nil.

A Disraelian Tory like Bryant could hardly be expected to ignore that shrinkage, or to rejoice in the soul-destroying unemployment and poverty that had disfigured Britain in the decade *before* the Wall Street crash. When some tycoon during the 1926 General Strike upbraided the strikers as “a damn lot of revolutionaries,” George V snapped back: “Try living on their wages before you judge them.” Such compassion

as King George's was hardly commonplace in the England of his day; and Bryant lived in dread of a sullen, deracinated proletariat going down the Bolshevik path, tempted by pied pipers from the Fabian Society and the London School of Economics. This was, we should recall, the era when all but a handful of British newspapers turned themselves into apologists for Spain's exterminationist Reds; the era, also, of H. G. Wells prattling about Uncle Joe's "kind face," not to mention Beatrice Webb hailing the Holodomor's architect as a moral teacher almost in the Beatrice Webb league.

Dr. Stapleton devotes one especially poignant remark to Bryant's difficulties after 1945: "Bryant fought the cultural Cold War with no official or institutional backing." This has a familiar sound to it; Bryant had never heard of the term *paleoconservative*, but he embodied the thing well enough. (He had written in *The Age of Elegance*, to thumb his nose at the Century of the Common Man: "True aristocracy, after true religion, is the greatest blessing a nation can enjoy.") Granted, he routinely read *Encounter*, which lauded him after his death as one of its well-wishers. Nonetheless it is hard to see what he could have had in common with that publication. Considering that *Encounter* editor Irving Kristol initially regarded even Michael Oakeshott—a much more self-consciously "intellectual" intellectual than Bryant—as unpublishably deficient in Manhattanite high seriousness, Kristol Senior is still less likely to have clasped Bryant to his bosom.

During the lead-up to the 1945 general election (which almost everyone in England, including Attlee, expected to result in a Churchill triumph), Bryant had been urged to stand as a Conservative parliamentary candidate. He wanted none of it. "After 20 years of disillusionment," he answered,

with words that will find an echo in many a younger heart, "I am too old to crusade any more for Tory ideals only to find that one is being a smokescreen for stupidity, inertia, and greed." Subsequently his editing of Lord Alanbrooke's diaries brought him into open conflict with Churchill's most fervent champions, already reeling from the onslaught recently made on them by Richard Aldington's deflation of T. E. Lawrence. He sympathized with the 1942 Beveridge Report's calls for national insurance and a national health service; with (despite some grumbling) the Attlee welfare state in its early stages—almost anything, he thought, had to be an improvement on his childhood's plutocratic bullies—and with Harold Wilson's first term (1964–1966) in office. After retirement, Wilson nominated a late Bryant book, *Spirit of England*, as his favorite new release of 1982. This must have been among the former prime minister's last ratiocinative acts before early-onset Alzheimer's overtook him, poor man.

By 1970, Bryant's sales had plunged; the contempt for him exhibited by what Orwell called "the right Left people" could no longer be disguised; and the great rampaging divisions led by Christopher Hill, Eric Hobsbawm, Raphael Samuel, and other Red Army commanders on their long march through the institutions had already massed. While Bryant had his readership still, it was not from what advertising agencies would call "a sexy demographic." Nor did Thatcher's advent elicit from him the admiration that it inspired in postwar Tories of the Kingsley Amis type. He wrote of her promised economic dogmas with a certain amused detachment, saying that they might have been fitting in the eighteenth century, but were meaningless in what he called "the changed circumstances of the 20th century."

On the issue of Europe, Bryant felt closer to the old-fashioned anti-Common Market British left of Foot and Tony Benn than to Thatcher, Edward Heath, or anyone else among the post-Churchill Conservatives. With unexpected ingenuity he turned one of the standard pro-Europe arguments on its head, ascribing provincialism to the *Europeans*, and crediting Britain with having imported all the best aspects of different European nations to suit its own discrete purposes. This contention at least amounts to serious thought, which is more than can be said for the standard Euroskeptical attitude of “the wogs begin at Calais.”

The England in which Bryant passed away, thirty years ago, is now “one with Nineveh and Tyre.” *Deo gratias*, he died before his simple, inherent, unquestioning Anglican faith could be comprehensively trashed by feminist and “marriage equality” pressure groups. No such dire knowledge arose to torment Bryant’s later years. Nor (such are Providence’s mercies) did Bryant the impassioned monarchist live to behold the last traces of monarchical propriety destroyed by the gutter press and by the Princess Diana cult. He died when official Conservatism consisted of more or less predictable arrivistes. That the Tories should ever entrust parliamentary rank to one Stephen Milligan (1948–1994), a transvestite who autoerotically asphyxiated himself, would for Bryant have been inconceivable. Had he lived to behold it, even he might have lamented Britain’s national gift for compromise. As for the salivating devotion to Blair and Blairism, which the British institutional right now considers mandatory,

it is difficult to imagine anything that could have depressed Bryant more.

Theodore Dalrymple’s and Peter Hitchens’s unsparing reportage confirms that Britain since 1985 has become, for the first time in its history, a land where the overwhelming majority of inhabitants believe in nothing whatsoever. The outcome makes such earlier amateur-hour attempts at cultural revolution as Mao’s Red Guard frenzies and Lenin’s atheist museums pale into the most complete insignificance. As an antidote—provisional of necessity—to the resultant societal horror, Bryant’s finest writing assumes a new magnitude. With savoring that writing, as with watching a black-and-white Hollywood movie, the very act of switching into an utterly *démodé* mind-set forms part of the satisfaction involved.

There is more to it than this, though. Unforced eloquence of the Bryant type is scarce at any time. How much more scarce is it in an age when our most representative leaders cannot string together two sentences without speechwriters and teleprompters! Bryant’s eloquence sprang from quiet but towering conviction.

Ultimately Bryant stood—whatever spiritual hostages he left to the fortune of Henrician and Elizabethan church settlements—for a confident and decent Christendom. That is why he is hated so much by those who, like Roberts, remain mindlessly enslaved to what Waugh (back in 1938) prophetically called “the fear of Fascism, that is the new fear of Hell to the new Quakers.”

*Judge of the nations, spare us yet:
Lest we forget—lest we forget!*

