

## An Expatriate's Christmas in England

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In contemporary American life perhaps no condition evokes as much concern, planning, and outlay as being “home” at this time of year. What other occurrence, apart from war or hurricane, could account for a human migration that annually fills roadways, planes, trains, busses and the occasional sleigh with travelers en route to some vision or version of “home?” Even our Christmas tales and myths place great emphasis on homecomings – Ebenezer Scrooge’s journey to hardheartedness begins with his father’s refusal to allow him to come home for Christmas, and of course his salvation is sealed only when he joins his nephew’s family and that of his clerk, Bob Cratchit, in an avuncular celebration of the holiday. The Grinch hates Christmas because he lives as an exile and hermit; and his saving also comes with an invitation to join the circle of the Whos in their annual celebration, and being accorded the paterfamilial honor of carving the roast beast.

Yet who can deny the cruel irony of this season – its essential paradox of celebrating light in the darkest time of the year, or birth in the midst of nature’s deadness? And what irony of ironies the Christmas homecoming, given that many of the traveling horde are returning to places all-too gladly left, to roles – child, parent, sibling – now as ill fitting as a twenty-year old tuxedo and twice as uncomfortable? And yet like migratory birds we humans return, and return again to those perches of old.

But whatever the angst of such homecomings, it is nothing as compared to the inability to journey home – the specter of homelessness at Christmas. I have faced this only once in my life, when more than a quarter century ago, my wife and I stared out from the depths of a Belgian December at the bleak prospect of Christmas away from family and friends. We were living in Ghent at the time, and had already endured several months of a rough passage to mastery of the language and living conditions of our new home. And December too often brings cold rain on cold rain to that semi-aquatic part of

the world, with darkness seemingly descending at noon – it is no wonder that Belgium exceeds any other country in the variety and ubiquity of beer and breweries.

We were saved from bleakness at the last moment by an invitation from an English family whom my wife had briefly stayed with nearly ten years before while she was a participant in a student travel group. The Millers lived in Chatham, Kent, on a direct train line to London, and they expressed delight in taking in a pair of American expatriates for Christmas and the New Year's celebrations. So we bundled together the necessary clothes and presents for the journey and gladly left our small apartment in the Prinsenhof of Ghent for an "English" homecoming.

I don't know what I expected of that trip before setting out. I had never been to England, and I was certainly no Anglophile. I had always loved Shakespeare, but most of my favorite novels and novelists were German or Russian, and I haughtily considered my colleagues who specialized in British history to be wimpishly unwilling to learn a foreign language. I suppose my expectations were simply those of a tourist who planned to see the sights of London while keeping as low a profile as necessary in the household we were joining. Like most twenty-somethings I was blithely unaware of the great chance to first spot England from a boat crossing the Channel – to see the white bluish of the Dover cliffs come into view as Hadrian, Augustine of Canterbury, and William the Conqueror had once done. Yet I doubt any of them shared their boat with a score or more British blokes who were self-importing English beer from France -- where perversely it was cheaper -- so that the entire lounge of the ferry was lined with hand trucks each stacked with six cases of a favorite brew.

My first impressions of the country were of an abiding shabbiness and disrepair particularly in comparison with France and Belgium. Admittedly, the view from a train is seldom the most flattering, but even given this it was clear that we had entered a distinctly poorer country, though we reveled in our ability to speak and mostly understand the language of its natives. With hindsight it is clear that 1970s Britain had yet to enjoy the "Economic miracle" that had transformed so much of the continent since

1945. Rationing of various kinds had endured into the 1950s, and the decades since had seen much labor and social turmoil. We were both a bit subdued as our train arrived and we walked into a bitter-cold Chatham, quickly traversing several blocks to the Victorian-era semi-detached home of Rob, Doreen, and their two sons Carl and Daryl.

Nothing could have prepared me for the next weeks of living with the Millers. Rob and Doreen were probably around forty at the time – he, a retired Royal Navy medic, had become a chiropodist in civilian life with an office a few blocks away in the High Street; his wife was a charming and slight woman whose life revolved around the care of two small boys and a large, draughty house. Rob loved to joke and tell stories, and his passionate hobby was what the British call caravanning, which involves towing a small mobile home to various locations in Britain to camp. While our welcome was warm, we quickly discovered that the Miller house had no central heating. Indeed, it had almost no heating at all except for a small gas fire in the first floor parlor, and as the temperature remained stubbornly in the 20s throughout our stay, we quickly adopted the family's warming practices. These involved wearing layers of woolens – we quickly visited the local Marks & Spencers for sweaters – packing the perimeter of the gas fire in the evenings (“Bum to Bum” Rob said), and filling hot water bottles to reduce the blood curdling shock of sliding between ice-cold sheets at night. The one oasis of warmth on the second floor, where our bedroom lay, was the warm water stream of the shower, and I vividly remember calculating how long it would take me to cross the thirty feet of thirty degree hallway separating my bed and the bath.

The one thing I don't remember much of that first trip to England was of playing tourist. Of course we visited the local sights – the brooding mass of Rochester cathedral, the site of the Battle of Hastings, and the home of Charles Dickens, who had lived in Chatham as a small boy. We also went to London several times, but all I remember of those visits was an ice-cold Christmas eve in a deserted city center, so unlike the picture painted by Dickens in his “Christmas Carol.” We were glad to return to that unheated house in Chatham, where we became increasingly involved in the family's preparations for Christmas and the parties that formed the bridge to the New Year.

Christmas dinner was the height of the celebration, and Doreen worked hard on the preparations for the meal. It was purely a family affair – we being included in that number by now – and it included traditional dishes and accoutrements both familiar and strange to us. I remember Doreen referring to making Christmas crackers, and I thought she was baking some homemade version of saltines. I was surprised and delighted to discover brightly wrapped tubes that popped when pulled apart to reveal party hats and toys inside. We all donned our hats, devoured the meal, and finished with the second surprise of the night. Ever since our arrival I had been struck by what I thought was a brightly colored sewing box resting on the sideboard in the dining room. Imagine my shock when Doreen picked this up, placed it on the table and proceeded to slice through what I now know was royal icing to reveal a layer of marzipan and fruitcake beneath.

Surprising to me now across the twenty six years since that Christmas are the vivid memories I have of the parties that followed the holiday, ending only in the local pub on New Year's Eve when we toasted in the new year. These were simple affairs for the most part; hosted by an extended group of friends that numbered some ten or so couples, who one after another opened their home for an evening during that week between Christmas and New Year. The parties all followed the same formula: first, there was good-natured socializing with much beer flowing. Here I was initiated into the secrets of real ale, black and tans, as well as lager and lime. Between ten and eleven invariably an extensive buffet supper was laid out, and the beer was replaced by coffee and cordials. At the last, the entire company formed a circle around the buffet table, joined hands, and sang "Auld Lang Syne." When the last lyrics faded away, everyone went home, relatively sober and warmed by feelings of friendship and good company.

It seems fitting somehow that in Charles Dickens's homeland -- indeed in his hometown -- I learned something of what makes a Christmas homecoming. One's family and old friends are nice but optional; the house need not be familiar or even heated: all that is needed is a place by the fire, a circle to join, hands to clasp, and a lyric by Bobby Burns to sing.

Gentlemen, I wish you all these things, and a goodly measure of holiday spirits as well, be they brewed, vinted, or distilled.