



Real England: The Battle Against the Bland

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Part personal journey, part manifesto, *Real England* offers a snapshot of a country at a precarious moment in its history, while there is still time to save its future. British citizens see the signs every day: the chain cafés and mobile phone outlets that dominate high streets; the disappearance of knobbly carrots from supermarket shelves; and the headlines about yet another traditional industry going to the wall. For the first time, here is a book that makes the connection between these isolated, incremental, local changes and the bigger picture of a nation whose identity is being eroded. As he travels around the country meeting farmers, fishermen, and the inhabitants of Chinatown, Paul Kingsnorth will refract the kind of conversations that are taking place in country pubs and corner shops across the land—while reminding readers that these quintessentially English institutions may soon cease to exist.

Real England: The Battle Against the Bland Details

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Author : Paul Kingsnorth

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Mark says

What will England be in 10-15 years time? Bland, corporate and homogenised unless we do something about it, according to Real England by Paul Kingsnorth. This book, more of a rallying cry than a death wail, focuses on the increasingly dull cultural landscape of England. We travel to different places sampling the tales of woe from various individuals and groups. Farmers, brewers, lock keepers, inn keepers, market stall holders, and ordinary people who just care. Care about their culture, care about their diversity and way of life. Although written by a fully fledged member of the Left, this book is neither political nor partisan. It is written above politics taking in things that both left and right care about and want to protect, for the same reasons but with different methods.

The omnipresent shadowy enemy are multinational corporations and an overwhelming government, who seem entwined in a symbiotic relationship of mutual cannibalism. There is more here though than anger and apathy, there are solutions, and they are simple. They must be simple, radical politics is only required for radical problems and the maintenance of our native landscape and vibrant culture is a simple proposition. We have been lazy and have not noticed the slow creep of the clones, but now we know. Most people are annoyed when their local pub becomes a Starbucks, or when a small bookshop closes to be replaced by a Subway, but few have done anything about it. Now, slowly but surely, people are. This is an important book, and a blueprint for direct action without having to commit to an ideology outside of caring for one's own personal environment.

The book focuses on England primarily because the author is English and felt that others would write better about their native land than he. Kingsnorth clarifies this by reserving special condemnation for the lack of an English parliament and the benefits that would bring. Far from being couched in petty nationalism, Kingsnorth explains that the English are at a distinct disadvantage from their Scottish or Welsh counterparts during parliamentary votes. Many people have a natural instinct to reject English pride through our historical attachment to Empires built on slavery and colonialism. Kingsnorth argues that it is possible to be a proud Englishman without becoming a jingoistic racist. Once we do that, we will realise the special things contained within these borders and be aware of just how fragile they are.

It's a wonderful book choc full of human interest stories and personal accounts of battles with big business and government bureaucracies.

Anyone who has even a passing care of diversity of culture, individuality and England itself should read this book. There are some accusations of an unwillingness to change and nimbyism that will come but this isn't about wanting to remain in the past, it's about not wanting to change things for the worse, or change them just because if we do they will make more money. We know what out past is, the future is much darker at the moment, but it must contain an England that the people have asked for, not that "growth" has supplied them with. It can only do this if we take action.

John Gillespie says

I sense that Kingsnorth tries really hard not come off as sad, angry, or both throughout this treatise on the decline of local culture in the face of corporate, multi-national homogenization. He's writing about England,

but this is easily the story of what has been happening throughout the modern world. He laments, "We are not a society that appreciates value. We appreciate speed, instant gratification, primary colors, simple answers...We are losing sight of who we are and where we have come from. And we don't care," and he admits, "It is genuinely hard for someone of my generation to imagine that much of the...countryside was like this just fifty years ago. I almost wish I hadn't seen it. If you don't know what you've lost, it doesn't hurt." I hope I never meet the automaton who could feel no pain while reading this book.

Imogen says

When I first saw the title of this book, I thought it might be something too... patriotic for me, a railing against the disappearing England of the past century with all its colonial and conservative connotations. But when I started to read it, I was entranced; it details the ways in which the landscape is becoming homogenised and levelled and changed from what it was like centuries ago. There is a lot to love about the past, and the parts in this book that resonated most with me are the parts about the agricultural and natural past, and how with every year the numbers of native and visiting birds decrease. The hedgerows shrank and the field-mice and harvest-mice fled, the foxes were forced into the cities... but the chapter ends on a hopeful note. Things can change, if we try, and things are slowly getting better in the hedgerows. Given that this was written pre-Brexit, upon re-reading it after the Brexit vote I worry more for the future.

The chapters on wildlife alone would be enough for me to recommend this book, but it also discusses the degradation of pubs, of villages, of canals and locks, and things that are a part of this landscape that I had never thought about. It talks, too, about the importance of markets and meeting-places.

This book is brilliant, and more necessary than ever.

Douglas says

This fine book documents and explains how corporate interests and central government with the acquiescence of the urban middle class are taking the heart out of English life: pubs, independent shops, waterways, farms, urban public space, villages, orchards -- all fast vanishing forever. Everybody knows it is happening and people are bewildered by it. This book supplies the grim answers and suggests defence strategies. Globalisation is producing these effects worldwide and nowhere is immune from them. A timely book.

Karen says

This book is about some of the ways that the uniqueness of England's culture and landscape is being homogenized by economic policies that favor large corporate interests over small, local interests. Kingsnorth looks at the replacement of pubs that reflect local character with chain "pubs" that market themselves to certain populations instead of serving as a gathering place for a community, the loss of family farms to agribusiness, the loss of unique, locally owned stores in towns and villages across England to large out-of-town supermarkets and chain stores. The book is focused on England, but what Kingsnorth is pointing out can be found here in America, too. Everywhere you go, you find the same stores with the same merchandise-

-to an extent that was not the case when I was a kid. In some ways it's reassuring to know that when you go to Wichita, KS you'll be able to find the restaurants and drugstores you're used to, but it's disappointing, too. Traveling somewhere new is far less of an adventure. I've noticed this for a long time, so finding this book was gratifying, because it doesn't seem like something that people find worth talking about--beyond occasional news about a plucky town that successfully fights off a new Walmart.

Kingsnorth has plenty of examples of English uniqueness being destroyed by powerful corporate interests, but he also has a few heartening examples of people or communities who have been able to preserve their pub or store or farm. As I read, I was encouraged to be able to think of all the unique businesses, communities, institutions that make Twin Cities and Minnesota culture distinctive. Kingsnorth makes some interesting arguments about needing to develop a sense of Englishness that is based on geography or place rather than biology so that people can find English culture worth defending without fear of being called racist or xenophobic. Although the book is focused only on England (and not Great Britain), its points are easily translatable to other contexts. Kingsnorth is an engaging writer and I heartily recommend *Real England*.

Serendipitychild says

A fantastic book for people who like to feel disgruntled with the state of the country (Which I do). If you like to justify your feeling that the country is going to the dogs and isn't it a shame, then this is the book for you. Might make you feel a bit depressed if you thought everything was hunky dory.

Ellen says

Mark Rylance has brought up this book during recent interviews regarding his role in the play *Jerusalem*, and Kingsnorth wrote a short essay for the latest *Jerusalem* (West End return) programme, so I really wanted to read it. I wasn't disappointed.

In the same vein as Show of Hands' song "Roots", this book discusses how English traditions are disappearing -- and no one seems to care nor even notice. As with the song, it's not meant to be an anthem for the BNP nor the EDL (recall how angry Steve Knightley and Phil Beer were when the BNP tried use 'Roots'). It talks more about how the English seem almost embarrassed about their traditions, such as Morris dancing and how some people even decry them as not being traditional -- falsely claiming that Morris dancing was a Victorian tradition.

However, Kingsnorth goes even deeper, looking at the role economics plays in the loss of traditions, such as the fact that more and more traditional pubs are closing (and are replaced by flats, coffee shops or corporate-run pubs that care only about the bottom line and eschew individuality and taste). Small traditional, neighbourhood markets, such as Queens in London, don't make enough money; that space would be better turned into flats, offices and flashy shops, say developers.

I don't necessarily agree with everything that Kingsnorth says. But his viewpoint is one that needs to be heard -- and not only in the UK.

Sarah says

Quite an inspiration. I don't agree with all of his summing up chapter, but I don't need to do that to appreciate his arguments and conclusions. It's a useful way of looking at the battles we are facing day to day so another weapon to use. Doesn't provide any ready made answers as to the way forward, but then who does? Well worth reading.

Steve Gillway says

Anybody who has been around and travelled around England over the last 20 years will recognise the themes presented here. I know from personal experience - living in a village in Cornwall, where the heart is ripped out by holiday homes - my home village has become a Tescotown where they control all the staples for a captive audience - the changing nature of shops and pubs. And I also realise how complicit I have been in all this. I shop in a supermarket up the road, I used to have a box delivered, but they couldn't come when it was convenient for me, I buy stuff online, and I even stay in holiday cottages. The shame of it all. The writer is right there is something more satisfying in the independent- the unusual. Last weekend I went to a pub- The major's retreat, what a fantastic pub, like going back in time food, beer, atmosphere without a whiff of corporate behaviour. It's all out there and needs nurturing. After all we have got to be the eccentric, individuals the world like to think of us as and try and get away from sheeplike behaviour. Things may be cloned, but we don't have to be clones. Rant over.

By the way, a great book for giving you the evidence for things you have more than an inkling are going on.

Kathleen Fowler says

This book is a heartfelt appeal to the English to protect their heritage before it is too late, but I fear Kingsnorth is just a lone voice crying out in the wilderness. The English, as a whole, are too busy reaping the rewards of their affluence to take much interest in preserving independent pubs, or to worry about protecting the bohemian character of the canals. I sympathize with Kingnorth's position and share his concerns, but I fear his David is challenging the Goliath of change, which rolls on relentlessly. And besides, some of the things he wishes to preserve may once themselves have been harbingers of change, resented and reviled by traditionalists of another, earlier era. The canals, for instance, were originally built during the industrial revolution to get coal to market more efficiently. I'm playing devil's advocate here, but my point is that culture is always in flux, and that the innovation of today may be the quaint artifact of tomorrow.

Kingsnorth is passionate about all things English, and his passion is infectious. Each chapter of his book examines a particular aspect of English heritage that is in danger of extinction: independent pubs and breweries, working canals, small shops, small farms, inner city neighborhoods, villages as real communities, and apple varieties. Every aspect of English life is undergoing commercialization and homogenization. This is not unique to England, of course, it's happening all over the world as big business spreads its tentacles into every corner where there is big money to be made. Supermarkets run the small shops out of business, agribusiness runs the small farms out of business, local color is replaced by chain stores and malls, villages become bedroom communities. What remains is sterile and without character. The poor are displaced because they are taking up valuable space. What can be done about it? Community groups, historical preservation societies, small business associations and the like and have had very little impact thus far. Kingsnorth's conclusion is that, since government seems to be in collusion with big business (the economic

“bottom line” nowadays has become the end that justifies all means), it is up to (or down to, as the English say) the average citizen (known to big business as “the consumer”) to use the only real weapon they have: their purchasing power. If it were no longer profitable to pillage the “Real England” of the book’s title, it would stop. Let’s hope it’s not too late.

Lorenzo Berardi says

The main thesis behind this book is that there is no such thing as a "Real England". Not anymore. Not if you don't seek and fight for it. Whereas community pubs, local shops, farms and orchards used to stay for centuries an avalanche of Tesco supermarkets, chain stores and suburban "redevelopment" settlements have drawn a new English-non English landscape.

This is a new England where you can travel from north Brighton to south Carlisle without noticing any difference around you. Some people may find this evenness somehow reassuring making their grocery at Asda, buying clothes in Primark, selecting a new tea table from an Argos catalog, sipping a latte from a Starbucks branded cuppa and then heading to the nearest multiplex cinema, but not Mr Kingsnorth. And I am with him.

Although, "Real England" could be sometimes too idealist and no-logo oriented for my liking, I have to admit how what still strikes me in this country is how many things have this tendency of looking everywhere the same. What made either a little town or an average size city different from the others, that local character these places used to have is fading away while a few people seem to care.

Let's talk about my own personal experience in England. I moved to Abingdon (30,000 inhabitants) from Oxford just 9 months ago. In the meantime, 4 pubs have closed down just like 3 shops did in the downtown area, while two mini-Tescos and a Coop supermarket have opened. Abingdon High Street is lined with estate agencies, branch banks and the occasional charity shop. The local council thought about move and diminish the local library. There is no functioning movie-theatre in Abingdon and very little to do after 5 PM, apart from shopping in a 24 hours open Tesco at the edge of town. The favourite meeting point of the local kids is a kebab van parked in the Market Square.

Overall, I have got the feeling that Paul Kingsnorth is right: everything which made England English has been swallowed by international standardization and poor redevelopment. What I don't really like in this book is just the way it talks about "They".

"They" are the enemies of local communities, co-operatives and villagers who try to defend their surrounding from the brand invasion. "They" could be banks, local authorities, corporations or quangos (the funny neologism they use to name State-owned agencies in the UK), but are always evil.

Which is a point of view. As a matter of fact, Kingsnorth here creates a counterposition between these "They" and a sort of "Us" suggesting that every Englishman and woman should be aware of what is happening to their country.

This clash is nothing new. It's decades that English anthropologists, historians, sociologists, economists and novelists are warning against the end of England as an identifiable entity. Some people blamed the growing influence of immigrants on the English society while others (and Kingsnorth gets the credit of being among them) reckon how foreigners actually brought even more diversity and cultural richness into England being victims and not executioners of the social impoverishment of a whole country.

Back in 1938 and back from the horrors of the Spanish Civil War, George Orwell decided to dedicate to his own homeland the final lines of "Homage to Catalonia":

"Down here it was still the England I had known in my childhood: the railway-cuttings smothered in wild flowers, the deep meadows where the great shining horses browse and meditate, the slow-moving streams bordered by willows, the green bosoms of the elms, the larkspurs in the cottage gardens; and then the huge peaceful wilderness of outer London, the barges of the miry river, the familiar streets, the posters telling of cricket matches and Royal weddings, the men in bowlers hats, the pigeons in Trafalgar Square, the red buses, the blue policemen - all sleeping the deep, deep sleep of England, from which I sometimes fear that we shall never wake till we are jerked out of it by the roar of bombs".

Nowadays, this extremely long - but all the same wonderful - paragraph could be easily read as a prophecy of what would have happened next: World War II, Coventry and the Blitz, the hard years after the end of the conflict with the final gasp of a tottering British Empire.

But what Orwell was also trying to say in this elegy of a bygone land is that his own country was on the verge of losing its peculiarities, its character, what made England a different place than the rest of Europe.

That deep, deep sleep which the abrupt awakening of German bombs and V2s would have eventually stopped was at the same time a critic and a praise of England in Orwell's words. On the one hand, it certainly meant distrust and closeness towards the rest of the world, but on the other hand it also implied a diversity brought by centuries of a parallel social, cultural and political development. England was going to lose all of this and Orwell knew very well how, for better or worse, most of the unmistakable Englishness he liked and despised would have disappeared soon.

It's no coincidence that Paul Kingsnorth quotes Orwell pretty often here.

"Real England" worths to be read if only for learning a few things about England that don't appear very often in the newsreels and becoming familiar with a bunch of characters who dedicated their lives to the survival of what the Kinks named "The Village Green Preservation Society". It was 1968 and a pop band had already spotted very well what was going on in England.

Jonathan Peel says

A superb book and a must read for anyone teaching or studying Butterworth's *Jerusalem*.

Norman Fellows says

It's a bit milky. I'm sorry not to be more analytical. But if my fast and authoritative response is not the literary critique you wanted you could do worse than read the sp!ked review by Neil Davenport: The reactionary firebrands of 'Real England'.

Mark says

Excellent.

NoBeatenPath says

While there is much in the general premise of this book that I agree with - that the British highstreet is becoming a homogenised and bland place that ultimately threatens consumer choice for example - the general tone of it was ultimately off-putting. The insinuation that cities/urban centres are not 'English' reveals a snobbery or provincialism that overlooks English history and reality. The world Kingsnorth uses as examples of 'Real England' is often entertaining, but there is almost a bigotry against anything that dares to be progressive, which is at odds with some of the greatest achievements of England over the past century.

In summary - the author doesn't like towns, and seems to think we should all live in small, preferably rural, communities. And if you don't like that idea you are obviously someone who is stupid enough to have been sucked into the insidious globalisation that is ruining this sceptred isle.
