

NATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

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NATIONAL character is mainly the result of three factors—viz., race, environment and history. Race is potent, but its influence is difficult to define, and not always easy to trace. We have to remember that there are no pure races. Even the Jews, the most solicitous of peoples to preserve racial purity, have a considerable alien admixture. Then, homogeneity is religious rather than racial. The English are a combination of Mediterranean, Norman, Kelt, Saxon, Angle; the French of Nordic, Alpine, Mediterranean, Kelt, Iberian; the Germans of Nordic and Alpine; the Italians of Nordic and Mediterranean. Civilisation is less a matter of race than of culture and history. French civilisation is probably the most homogeneous of all; nevertheless, the French people are not racially homogeneous. There is a large Nordic element in the North, Alpines are numerous in the Centre, Mediterraneans in the South, Kelts in the West. There are at present over two millions of foreign settlers in France, Italians being the most numerous, while there are many Poles and Belgians, and a considerable number of Spaniards. Yet French civilisation is a unity, a unity of temper, taste, world-outlook, due to its centripetal tendency, to its natural charm, and to the course of history. It is a Latin civilisation, with its roots in the Roman Empire.

Environment, understood in the widest sense to include climate, food, clothing, education, sport, has been a large factor, perhaps the largest factor in the evolution of national character, as it has been the largest factor in the evolution of national physique.

History, the course of events, the permutations and vicissitudes of civilisation, is the third factor and not the least important. The British character has been modified by an insular position, by the generally fortunate course of events, by the gifts of kings, statesmen, soldiers and prelates, by the Renaissance, the Reformation, Puritanism, parliamentary government, the industrial revolution. The character of the French has been modified by the doctrines of Rousseau, Voltaire and Comte, by the Revolution and the Napoleonic era, by victorious wars and grave defeats, by the strife of parties and sects. If there had been no Revolution, the French temper and world-outlook of to-day would be different. As Grant

Robertson says, "The secret of French strength (at the Revolution) lay in the moral magic of French principles, pitted against the worn-out monarchies of the continent and the Empire in its dotage with no faith but in the divine right of dynastic selfishness." Germany owed her modern temper and outlook, now considerably modified by the results of the World War, to the rise of the Hohenzollerns, to military success, the spread of the spirit of militarism, and the dreams of world empire. No contrast can be more vivid than the contrast between the Germany of Lessing, Goethe, Herder and Schiller and the Germany of Bismarck, Moltke, Tirpitz, Ludendorf and ex-Kaiser Wilhelm. Lessing abjured patriotism, and thought it contemptible. He was a convinced cosmopolitan. Goethe was a tepid and almost uninterested spectator of Prussia's struggle after Jena. He thought it foredoomed to failure. These great thinkers thought in terms of humanity, not in terms of race and nationality. Their successors thought in terms of an illusion fostered by three successful wars, an illusion from which Germany is now awakening.

The mentality of East and West presents many points of contrast. Race and climate have been potent in the East, and religion, partly cause and partly effect, has counted for much. The dreamy mysticism of India seems the natural product of her sun-baked plains and mountain fastnesses. Nirvana makes little or no appeal to the energetic and strenuous West. Transmigration of souls, surely the most marvellous of dogmas, dominates the Hindu, but fails to interest the European. The ethical outlook of East and West shows startling contrasts. As Mitchell Innes puts it:

Our stern sense of justice, meted out with equal hand, never wavering, never forgiving, paying little heed to the complex questions of temperament, environment and temptation, strikes the Eastern mind as simply barbarous. The man who, though having just cause for anger, yet refuses to punish and forgives time and again, that is the man who is most respected. One has to realise this point of view in order to understand the exhortation "Not till seven times, but until seventy times seven." We accept the principle that an offence entails a penalty; we do not think about the question at all. There exists no such doctrine in Mohammedan countries, nor probably in any Eastern country. The Koran, it is true, provides penalties, sometimes of extreme severity, but it is left to the injured person to demand their application. The punishment of the offender is not the duty of the State, but the right of the injured.

Like all other races, the British race is a hybrid. It has elements probably derived from the original inhabitants of the country, now represented chiefly in Wales. Of these we know little.

The Mediterranean race probably penetrated to Britain at a remote epoch. It does not seem that the Romans, for all their 400 years occupation of the country, left much impression upon the racial quality of the inhabitants. The Normans, Saxons, and Angles contributed the Nordic element. It has been shown that about 68 per cent of the inhabitants of Great Britain are "dark", i. e. with brown or black hair and eyes, and about 32 per cent "fair", i. e. with auburn or red hair and blue or grey eyes. Thus it would appear that the Saxon-Norman element represents a minority. It is also probable that the "dark" type is a majority in the towns, and is increasing, that it is what we call a "dominant"; the "fair" type being in a majority in rural districts, and a "recessive".

The Englishman possesses much common sense, self-control, love of liberty and of order, fortitude in the face of danger, sense of honour, loyalty to class, party, or sect, sporting instinct. He believes in settling disputes by discussion and argument, and is ready to compromise. He has a strong sense of fair play, and his deepest term of reproach is that an action "is not cricket". He shines in administration, and in the management of inferior races. His success in this department is not due to any psychological acuteness or any special capacity to understand the mentality of these races—in such matters his capacity is only mediocre—but to his sense of justice, his relative freedom from prejudice, and his pride in believing that his word can and must always be trusted. The liar, the cheat, the hypocrite are anathema to him. He is, on the whole, generous and hospitable. On the other hand, he is deficient in ideas, in intellectual curiosity, and in artistic faculty. He has little breadth of view or variety of interest. He is not quick in the "uptake", and requires a good deal of time to make up his mind. He is somewhat deficient in taste, in tact, and in social instinct. He is humorous rather than witty. He bows too much to convention and sense of propriety. He is rather fond of show. He is somewhat afraid to face nature, and incurs the reproach from other nations of being just a little hypocritical. He has a full measure of self assurance and self-sufficiency, which does not add to his popularity when he is on his travels. There is a touch of insularity in his temperament and outlook.

The Scotsman and the Irishman show a somewhat different mentality.

The Scotsman is industrious, thrifty, persevering, intellectually keen, fond of philosophy and theology, warmly appreciative of learning, cautious, "canny", somewhat silent, angular and "dour", a warm friend, a trusty colleague, very clannish, a lover of his

country, generally a master of his job. His caution in money matters, often made a reproach to him, is the natural outcome of a rather barren country, and centuries of restricted economics.

The typical Irishman is genial, courteous, witty, companionable, hospitable, kindly, fonder of pleasure than of work, devoted to sport, an excellent conversationalist, somewhat happy-go-lucky, loyal to his church, respectful towards learning, carefree, very honourable towards women. Irish wit is proverbial. The Irish are the wittiest people in the world. Wit pervades all classes, and often shines most brilliantly in the peasant or the car-driver. Irish wit is not mordant or sarcastic or ill-natured. It is usually kindly, but sometimes has a sting in its tail. It is often singularly ready and apt, as the proceedings of the Irish courts of law amply testify. The lower orders in Ireland have a natural courtesy, not excelled and perhaps hardly equalled in any other country. The chastity of the women deservedly stands high. They are also excellent mothers. In the rural districts, in spite of privation, poor food, and indifferent housing, the infant mortality is one of the lowest in the world. The weak points of the Irishman are his tendency to faction, his readiness to quarrel on slight provocation, his comparative incapacity for sustained labour or united effort, his readiness to sacrifice his interests to his prejudices, his passions, his vanity, his morbid dwelling upon the past to the neglect of the present. There is a touch of melancholy in the Irish temperament, the fruit of poverty, penal laws, injustice, misfortune, ill success. Irish history is largely a record of struggle, strife, discord, and failure. Sympathy, comprehension, co-operation, helpfulness, toleration, have been largely lacking. A shadow has been over the law. It has left its imprint upon the Irish character.

The French excel in taste, tact, felicity and lucidity of speech, social instinct, logical discernment, clearness of ideas, thrift, intuition, aesthetic capacity. They have a natural sense of harmony and propriety. They have more intellectual courage and honesty than the British. They are not afraid to face nature. The lower orders are provident, and their providence may tend to avarice. The French value equality more than liberty, and even more than justice. They are idealistic, readier than the British to fight for a principle or for an idea. They put more idealism and passion into their politics than the British, and hence are less ready to be guided by experience. They are the most national of peoples in the field of literature, and have less knowledge of other literatures than any of the other leading nations. French literature is *facile princeps* in world circulation. It finds readers everywhere, and

its masterpieces are translated into a multitude of tongues. This is due to its natural charm, its lucidity, its fearlessness, its freedom from prejudice, its breadth of appeal. The French are more original than the English, and in many respects Paris is more of an intellectual centre than London. They are less under the influence of the past than the English, less credulous, less superstitious, less inclined to the occult. They are more imaginative, more malleable, more indocile than the English. Hypocrisy is not a failing of the French. Their tendency is rather to brag of vices. They are lenient towards sexual irregularities, and the *crime passionnel* rarely fails to make a successful appeal to French juries.

French women are graceful, elegant, charming, rather than beautiful. They have instinctive sense of harmony, and of the fitness of things. Their taste in dress is proverbial. They know how to avoid ungraceful attitudes and unbecoming games. They are naturally affectionate, domestic, and loyal to their home. French fiction, which is essentially Paris fiction, gives a wholly erroneous picture of domestic morals in France. They are at least as pure as the domestic morals of other nations. The French woman is a loyal wife and an affectionate mother. She is often the active and capable helpmeet of her husband in business and family affairs. She keeps her children with her, and does not readily hand them over to the nurse-maid and the nursery. She does not easily fall in love; she regards that as rather bad taste, but she holds herself ready to fall in love when a suitable man is presented to her as a prospective husband. The French matrimonial scheme is sometimes the target for satire by other nations, but experience shows that it is at least as successful as the British or the American model. A *dot* helps to safeguard both the interests of the home and the independence of the wife. The education of the French woman is often limited, narrow, too clerical. She is not encouraged to use her excellent brains, to think for herself, to cultivate independence and breadth of view. Probably in such matters some progress is going on, but tradition and prejudice are strong.

The chief weaknesses of the French character are vanity, conceit, self-importance. *La Gloire* has often led France into trouble. Benjamin Constant was once asked whether Bonaparte really possessed the affections of the French people. He replied: "Certainly not, but the French are so vain that they cannot bear the insignificance of neutrality, and will affect to belong to the triumphant party from an unwillingness to confess that they belong to the conquered." La Fontaine has some stinging lines upon the weakness of his countrymen in fancying themselves

“personalities”, “people of importance”. The French are vain; the British are proud, too proud to be vain.

France has not made a great success of parliamentary institutions. The average duration of ministries under the Third Republic has been less than twelve months. Is this because the French have not the English genius for compromise? They import too much passion and too much severe logic into their politics, and hence they tend to split into numerous and hostile groups. They lack patience and prescience. The Dreyfus affair would have been impossible in England.

It used to be said that the French are bad colonisers, that they do not understand the mentality of the inferior races. That opinion must now be revised. Algeria, Tunis, and above all, Morocco, have proved that the French can show much tact, insight and sympathy in adapting themselves to the temper, interests, prejudices and outlook of Arab, Berber, Moor and Negro. Marshall Lyautez will go down to history as one of the greatest and most successful of rulers.

The Germans excel in industry, in thoroughness, in solidity of mind, in philosophical accumen, in spiritual intuition, in musical power, in the capacity to appropriate and develop the discoveries and ideas of other peoples, in self-control, in regard for authority. In philosophy and in music they lead the world. Kant remains, on the whole, the greatest modern thinker, as Beethoven remains the greatest modern musician. Goethe, as Hume Brown says truly, was “the clearest, largest and most helpful thinker of modern times.” The Germans are deficient in taste, manners and tact. Their psychology is often at fault. They do not understand foreign nations, and their control of the inferior races has not usually been successful. In recent times they suffered inordinately from “swelled head”, which in due time brought its nemesis. Prince Bülow sums up his fellow-countrymen as follows—“We Germans are a sentimental, tender-hearted people, and are prone always, and perhaps too much so, to follow the dictates of our heart against our better judgment. But, on the other hand, our passion for logic amounts to fanaticism; and whenever an intellectual formula or a system has been found for anything, we insist with obstinate perseverance on fitting realities into the system.

Germany has not made a conspicuous success of parliamentary government, though it is premature to pronounce it a failure. To quote Prince Bülow again: “We are not a political people. Not that we ever lacked penetration and understanding for the sequence of political things, or for the essence and association of

the religious, moral, social, legal and industrial forces which condition politics. . . . But what we did lack, and what we still lack, is the art of proceeding from insight to practical application, and the greater art of doing the right thing politically by a sure creative instinct, instead of only after much thought and considerable cogitation."

J. A. Cramb says truly: "More than any race known to history, the Teuton has the power of making other religions, other thoughts, other arts his own, and sealing them with the impress of his own spirit." Hence he makes an excellent immigrant, adapts himself easily to new conditions, and is readily absorbed. He is well educated, industrious, competent, law-abiding. It is curious that he does not seem to have been a successful coloniser, but it is well to remember that of colonisation German experience is scanty and recent.

Recent literature from Germany encourages the hope that the results of the World War have led to a marked change in German psychology. The doctrine of "blood and iron" has waned. Those memories of three successful wars have been overshadowed by the bitter memories of a war of defeat and humiliation. Germany's natural bent towards philosophy and literature is re-asserting itself. Goethe, rather than the war lords, makes appeal to the younger generation. That there should be a vein of melancholy and pessimism is natural, perhaps inevitable. Spengler's *Decline of the West* is best interpreted as a sign of the times, rather than as a trustworthy prognostic. The theory of alternate cycles of progress and of retrogression was not unknown to the Greeks, but its historical foundations are insecure. At all events, the history of China does not support it.