

Letter From England

by Derek Turner

A Valediction for Enoch Powell



Enoch Powell is dead, and it is as if a hill has suddenly vanished from the horizon. British life, conservative life, political philosophy, economic philosophy, classicism, Biblical studies, and learning generally are all the poorer for the death of this English original. Powell was a man of many contradictions—classicist and romantic, patriot and imperialist, politician and moral arbiter, Englishman and Briton, gentleman and populist, soldier and philosopher, public spender and monetarist, man of impulse and man of reflection, introvert and weeper-in-public—who yet represented unchanging truths and steadiness of purpose to his devoted followers. “Enigmatic” was the polite word used by those on the left who hated his views but could not bring themselves to hate the man, but it is a quite useful signification for all that.

J. Enoch Powell was born in Birmingham on June 16, 1912, during a thunderstorm—a suitably Wagnerian beginning to a heroic life. The son of two schoolteachers, he could read by the age of three and was soon nicknamed “the Professor.” As a boy he was always reserved, to the point of seeming distant and withdrawn. He was called “scowly Powlly” by his colleagues, although later in life he insisted that he had been just like a normal boy at least some of the time. “I hesitate to recollect the deprecations committed [by himself, when a schoolboy] against the rolling stock of the West Midlands Railway,” he told a disbelieving television interviewer in 1995.

Showing an early interest in the classics, he won a scholarship to Trinity College, Cambridge, where he was a Fellow between 1934 and 1938. While there he came under the influence of A.F. Housman. Powell always loved Housman’s haunting *A Shropshire Lad*, and his own verse was derivative. During the 1930’s,

he traveled much on the continent, and became increasingly disturbed by the trends in Italy and Germany. His old love of Nietzsche and the militant atheism which it had inspired evaporated, although he retained his love of Wagner. Powell could see that Hitler was bent on war; worse, he thought that the Nazis would win. “I could hear this drumming coming right through the earth,” he later recalled. He was always chagrined by not becoming a professor at the age of 24, as Nietzsche had done, but he only missed the record by one year, becoming a professor of Greek at the University of Sydney in 1938.

As soon as war broke out, Powell enlisted as a private, and spent some of the happiest times of his life in the ranks. But his intelligence and linguistic abilities brought him to the attention of the Intelligence Corps, who speedily snatched him and promoted him. He had a dynamic military career, although he never saw any direct action. He coordinated attacks on Rommel’s supply lines, helping to ensure British victory at El Alamein. He soon rose to be the youngest brigadier in the army (at 31) and the only brigadier who had ever risen from private. Powell would give his comrades impromptu lectures on Greek and Roman history and culture as they drove through the desert, but he was not always good at practical things. A well-known Powell anecdote is about the tin of sausages that he could not open, and which cut his finger: “Oh the malice—the cursed, diabolical malice of inanimate objects! . . . If they want to be bloody-minded, I’ll show them, by God I will,” kicking the tin into a bush. Powell’s driving was also deservedly infamous, although he always retained his *sang froid*. Once, after driving into a ditch by mistake, he broke the silence after the crash by laughing: “Ha, ha, ha! Never been upset in a gig?” (a reference to an incident in a R.S. Surtees story). In 1943, he was awarded the Member of the British Empire and was posted to India, which he was visiting for the first time. He was captivated by India and instantly busied himself learning Hindi and Urdu. (During a street protest after his famed “Rivers of Blood” speech in 1968, he addressed some of the multi-racial rent-a-mob in fluent Urdu, which

they found somewhat disconcerting.) He also conceived the idea of being the Viceroy of India, and this ambition was what fired his decision to enter politics.

In 1945, he voted Labour, but he joined the Conservative Research Department in February 1946 after demobilization. He spent several frustrating years being rejected for 19 parliamentary seats before being adopted in the Tory marginal of Wolverhampton South West in 1950, winning by 691 votes. During this time, his views were slowly changing. In 1947, after the announcement of Indian independence, he walked through London all night trying to come to terms with what had occurred, but after arriving in the Commons, he soon began to change his emphasis, from imperialist to patriot. In 1995, he remembered how “I fell head over heels under the spell of the House of Commons. I said this is what I want. The only thing worth having is to be a member of this place and remain a member of this place—it was the incarnation of a nation to me.”

He was to be MP for Wolverhampton South West until 1974. Although tipped for rapid promotion, his political career started slowly. His first post was Parliamentary Secretary, Ministry of Housing and Local Government, from 1955-57, during which time he helped remove rent controls. His decent record here led to his promotion to Financial Secretary to the Treasury from 1957-58. He resigned from this position over Macmillan’s refusal to embrace monetarism. Margaret Thatcher later freely admitted her indebtedness to him. From the backbenches, he continued to raise a principled voice which won wide respect across party lines. In 1959, he famously criticized the conditions at a concentration camp in Kenya, where suspected insurgents were being abominably treated. He helped save the Macmillan government during the 1963 Profumo scandal by publicly declaring his confidence in Macmillan, so widely recognized was Powell’s moral probity.

Powell became Minister of Health in 1960, and his three-year reign there was marked by reform and, ironically in the light of his 1958 resignation, plenty of public spending. While Health Minister, he also went along with the existing

policy of recruiting Caribbean workers for hospitals, for which he came under fire after 1968. An amusing anecdote of his tenure is that when he was visiting a friend, he went to say good night to the friend's young children. He knelt down, picked up a potty from under the bed and smelt it. One of the children asked him why he had done that. "It is my job," he replied.

His views had evolved into unabashed English nationalism, whose symptoms included anti-Americanism, anti-European Economic Community sentiment, and growing reservations about the advisability of permitting large-scale immigration. His romantic view was crystallized in his speech to the Royal Society of St. George in 1961, in which he mentioned how the Athenians, returning to Athens after its sacking by Xerxes, found their sacred olive tree still growing amid the ruins:

So we today, at the heart of a vanished Empire, amid the fragments of a departed glory, seem to find, like one of her own oak trees, standing and growing, the sap still rising from her ancient roots to meet the spring, England herself . . . from brass and stone, from line and effigy, [our ancestors'] eyes look out at us, and we gaze into them, as if we would win some answer from their silence . . . tell us what it is that binds us together; show us the clue that leads through a thousand years; whisper to us the secret of this charmed life of England, that we in our time may know how to hold it fast.

But in 1968, in Birmingham, Powell made what has become known as his "Rivers of Blood" speech against immigration, and the chorus of outrage has still not died away. We must be "mad, literally mad, as a nation," he said, to permit immigration on this scale. "It is like watching a nation busily heaping up its own funeral pyre. . . . As I look ahead I am filled with foreboding. Like the Roman, 'I seem to see the river Tiber foaming with much blood.'" He read from the letter of a constituent who had written, "In this country, in 15 or 20 years time, the black man will have the whip hand over the white man" and alluded to the plight of a white pensioner who was "now the only white in her street" and who had had excreta pushed through her

letterbox by "picaninnies."

Although it was well received by the crowd, the speech, which had been partly televised, was widely condemned both for its content and its terminology. It was called an "evil speech" by the *Times*, and Tony Benn spoke hyperbolically of "Belsen in 1945." Party leader Ted Heath sacked Powell from his post as Shadow Defence Spokesman without giving him the benefit of the doubt. However, the London dockers and the meat porters of Smithfield Market marched in Powell's support, and within two weeks of the speech, he had received over 120,000 letters of support from the public. "Yet," as Denis Kavanagh wrote in his obituary of Powell in the left-leaning *Independent* on February 9, "the speech that made him also destroyed him . . . the more popular he became the more unacceptable he was to the political elite." Not all that much has changed; our present political elite is at least partly made up of the former students, now broadcasters and sociology professors, who used to disrupt Powell's speeches after 1968, shouting "Disembowel Enoch Powell!" and banging on tables to drown out his voice.

Powell was never allowed to forget that speech. On the one hand, public opinion was very much on his side, and Powell seems to have been instrumental in winning the 1970 election for the Conservatives, as the pro-Tory swing was greatest in his home base of the West Midlands. On the other hand, the clearly immoderate tone of parts of the speech may have given ammunition to those who cared nothing about the nation. Despite some of the terminology, Powell's thoughts on immigration were wise. Who can doubt his 1968 view that "Immigration is the fulcrum by which England is to be overturned"? Who can say in total confidence that Powell was wrong about the black man having "the whip hand over the white man" when one considers how race-based legislation and political correctness are destroying British freedoms? Powell's view on the racial dilemma was sophisticated and even compassionate: "It's not impossible [for a black person to be British] but it is difficult. . . . What's wrong with racism? Racism is the basis of nationality—racism is nationality . . . nations are usually based on the self-identification of its members and that's normally due to similarities that we call racial similarities. . . . An Englishman can love India without

wishing to see it on the streets of Birmingham."

His relationship with Heath kept deteriorating, as Heath was determined to immerse Britain in the European Economic Community and Powell, now a force to be reckoned with in the party and in the country at large, was equally determined to keep Britain free. Finally, he horrified Conservatives all over the country when he urged voters to choose Labour in 1974, because Labour had promised a referendum on EEC membership. (Labour won, but the 1975 referendum, of course, was lost.) He then switched parties and became Ulster Unionist MP for South Down between 1974 and 1987. He resigned in 1985 over the Anglo-Irish Agreement but was re-elected the following year.

In between all of this, he continued to apply his formidable intellect and gift of expression to many areas, in particular to Shakespeare (he cast doubt on the plays' authorship) and the Bible (he believed that the Gospels had been written by a committee and that Jesus Christ had been stoned rather than crucified). He often traveled alone on the Tube between Westminster and Sloane Square and was always listed in the telephone books. To relax, he went fox-hunting, watched Jacques Tati films, and walked around country churches. Although he usually looked forbidding, Powell was not without fun. Asked if his book on the Gospels was intended for the general reader, he said that it was intended "for the general reader who understands Aramaic and Greek." His old friend, Sir Teddy Taylor, MP, recalled how they had once been locked into a cemetery in Glasgow by mistake, having taken too long to look at some old headstones which had interested Powell:

We then had to climb over a wall which was about eight feet high, which involved considerable inconvenience and possible danger. However eventually we got over the wall, and Enoch with that delightful smile said to me: "What a wonderful headline that would make, Teddy—'Enoch climbs out from the dead!'"

Powell died in London on February 8. There was controversy even at his funeral. Because he had been a churchwarden at St. Margaret's Church, next to Westminster Abbey, for ten years, his

body was allowed to “lay in” at the Abbey—a privilege granted regularly to all long-term servants of the church. The (black) Bishop of Croydon, full of Christian charity, said that this privilege should have been withdrawn in Powell’s case, arguing that “Enoch Powell gave a certificate of respectability to white racist views which otherwise decent people were ashamed to acknowledge.” Some leftists were even more rancorous. Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, a writer on race relations, said in the *Guardian*: “I drank a glass of expensive wine to mark the day that Enoch Powell died. . . . I was ecstatic that his brooding presence . . . would no more poison the possibilities that this country now offers all of us, black and white . . . the hatred and paranoia in his flaming eyes were unforgettable.” Sneered Norman Shrapnel in the *Guardian*, at once insulting Powell and all the people of England: “Provincialism was of his essence; and English Midland provincialism at that, than which there is no more introverted.”

However, even Tony Blair felt compelled to admit: “There was no doubting the strength of his convictions or their sincerity, or his tenacity in pursuing them, regardless of his own political self-interest.” Tony Benn, MP, totally opposed to Powell on everything except Europe, spoke warmly of Powell as a “great Parliamentarian.” Mourners at the funeral included Sir Dennis Thatcher, John Major, Michael Portillo, Jonathan Aitken, Alan Clark, Viscount

Cranborne, Lord Parkinson, Ulster Unionist Party leader David Trimble, Tony Benn, Sir Hardy Amies, and a representative of the Queen. The service was traditional Anglican, from the opening sentences (“I am the resurrection and the life”) to the *Nunc Dimittis* (“Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace”). The address was given by Lord Biffen, formerly Conservative MP John Biffen, and a three-verse extract from Housman’s 1896 *A Shropshire Lad* was read: “Loveliest of trees, the cherry now / Is hung with bloom along the bough, / And stands about the woodland ride / Wearing white for Eastertide”—a verse that Powell could never hear without bursting into tears.

Outside the church, Powell partisans gathered to pay their respects. A 76-year-old from Basildon unfurled his St. George’s flag and said: “We have to keep our mouths shut but I wanted to send off a great English patriot myself.” A red, white, and blue blossomed wreath read “Enoch Powell, you were right. We are now going to the dogs. Ninety percent of people I know say you should have been PM.” Later that day, Powell was buried, wearing his brigadier’s uniform, in the cemetery of the Royal Warwickshire Regiment, in the spot he had selected 13 years before. Sir Patrick Cormack, MP, who gave the address at the funeral service, said that Powell “had the hallmark of the true gentleman—he treated everybody exactly the same.”

Said Charles Moore in the *Daily Telegraph*: “Apprehension of the past made Powell’s understanding of political events exceptionally deep and exceptionally painful. He suffered among his political contemporaries as a man with perfect pitch suffers among the tone-deaf. He knew so much more than they; he understood so much more; he was simultaneously so much more romantic and so much more rational.” Powell’s awareness of the decline in British and English fortunes was certainly strong. During an interview he once famously said, “I wish I had been killed in the war,” and his eyes filled with tears.

It is very difficult to gauge what effect Powell really had on British life, but he certainly had an enormous effect on a lot of influential people. As he noted in his biography of another Tory maverick, Joseph Chamberlain, all political careers end in failure, and in 1989, he admitted that he might have failed, although it did not mean that he was wrong. By 1995,

he was less despondent: “I hear my voice coming through in what is said.” Long and loud may it continue to do just that, and long may we listen to this voice of the intrinsic England.

Derek Turner is the editor of Right Now!, published in London.

Letter From Brussels

by Tomislav Sunic

The Maastricht Mystique



Even an expert must be mystified by the legal structures of the European Union Parliament and the European Commission. The EU Parliament has roughly 620 deputies, elected every five years from 15 Western European states. Voters from EU countries have no decision over the election of other countries’ deputies to the EU Parliament. The president of the EU Parliament is elected every six months—enough to jumpstart his rapid wheelchair on the way in and out. His short-term tenure is reminiscent of the perpetually mismanaged rotational presidency of the former Yugoslavia.

The real power broker in the EU is the European Commission, which is composed of 20 members, one to two persons from each member country. A commissioner, during his tenure, cannot be called to account by any single European country. Twenty commissioners thus have a decent margin of error. Nor are they “German,” “Dutch,” or “Italian” commissioners; they are, legally speaking, only *European* officials whose *European* allegiances must transcend their own birthplace. Although the EU is no state at all, it has, nonetheless, strong influence on all the states of Europe, and particularly on newly born states in postcommunist Eastern Europe. EU officials can lecture them freely on human rights or the free market and pontificate endlessly about the virtues of the Maastricht monetary convergence. The 20-member Commis-

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“In every corner of the world—in every village and city and community—the United Nations is a living testimony of hope. The United Nations lives in the heart and mind of every citizen striving to end violence and promote tolerance; advance development and ensure equality; protect human rights and alleviate poverty. The United Nations, at its best, enables the achievement of those highest of human aspirations.”

—from *The Quotable Kofi Annan*
(New York: *United Nations*, 1998)