

# England's Dreaming

By John Ghazvinian

In England, when a fast-talking salesman tries to turn a quick shilling by peddling an item of dubious merit onto an unsuspecting public, he is

## In Search of England: Journeys into the English Past

By Michael Wood  
University of California Press  
336 pages, \$24.95

accused of trying to sell "something that fell off the back of a lorry." The origins of the expression seem obvious enough—presumably something to do with quick-witted scavengers with a knack for making personal capital out of someone else's flotsam.

So when William Hague, the leader of the opposition Conservative Party, embarked on an American-style listening tour around Britain last month, talking to voters from the back of a truck, he probably should have known what he was in for. The abrasive national media, of course, made satirical hay of Hague's rather unfortunate choice of vehicle. But the bedraggled Tory leader's week became just a bit worse when Prime Minister Tony Blair stood up in the House of Commons during question time, looked the bald, beady Welshman squarely in the eye and suggested that "if ever there was a case of dodgy goods falling onto the back of a truck, this is it."

There was, however, a further irony. For years, the most common method of entry into Britain by illegal immigrants has been to jump onto the back of commercial big-rigs delivering goods from the Continent. It used to be the case that

sympathetic lorry-drivers making the channel crossing from France would look the other way as destitute families clambered into their cargo holds at night. Then came the 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act, with stricter searches and the threat of a £2,000 fine for drivers caught harboring the extra cargo. And, everyone assumed, that would be the end of it—no more dodgy immigrants falling off the backs of lorries.

But for most of this year—until they were embarrassed last June into a sheepish silence by the tragic and high-profile suffocation of 58 Chinese migrants in



Are King Arthur and his posse still relevant in Cool Britannia?

the back of a produce truck on a hot day in Calais—the British tabloids had again taken it upon themselves to impress into the hearts and minds of middle England the notion that there is an urgent problem with Britain's immigration policy. Somehow the country has become a "soft touch" for asylum-seekers, letting in a "flood" of "bogus applicants" who "abuse the welfare

rolls" and engage in "aggressive begging" in city centers across Britain. Never mind that Britain ranks only eighth in Europe in the number of refugees it accepts; it is an ugly fact that the idea of Fortress Britain staggers on, oblivious to the realities of the 21st century and her complicity in its miseries. Hague and the *Daily Mail* still trot out, in one watered-down form or another, the Victorian fictions of a breed apart, hoping to lend a sort of ersatz historical "explanation" to the fact that English people just don't like foreigners.

As Michael Wood reminds us in his book, *In Search of England: Journeys into the English Past*, 1997 was a big year for England. As Hong Kong was handed back to China, a new prime minister swept into power promising almost complete autonomy to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, as well as an end to the House of Lords as we know it. England has had to seriously re-evaluate its collective understanding of the past. John Major's warm-beer-and-cricket vision of England already seems as quaintly distant as wartime rationing, but the myths and fictions about English history and English identity are still very real to the emasculated carapace that 50 years of post-imperial decline has left behind. And it is these myths, and their connection to historical reality, that Wood sets out to explore.

Wood's particular interest is the late Anglo-Saxon period and the early Middle Ages. And England's past, as we are reminded from the get-go, is more multicultural than some might like to think. Indeed, there was no such thing as an "England" until successive waves of Britons, Celts, Angles, Saxons, Danes and Vikings—each exercising power over a different part of the island—were united under the rule of the kings of Wessex in the 10th century.

ry, only to be conquered themselves by a band of Vikings living in the north of France in 1066—the Normans.

Wood is not interested in making a political point about asylum-seekers—or anything else—but does explore the darker corners of what might be called England's historical imagination. The first part of the book highlights the complexities and contingencies of the country's early Medieval past—the what-ifs and the almost-was'n'ts of a murky and unstable time in the history of the North Atlantic Archipelago.

In his fascinating first chapter, Wood explores the theory of the "Norman Yoke," the idea that a freeborn, freedom-loving race of affable Anglo-Saxons had been quashed at Hastings by an illegitimate and repressive (and French-speaking) Norman regime, and that the nation's soul has been seeking a sort of atavistic retribution ever since. The communistic Diggers of the English Civil War, whose leader, Gerrard Winstanley, denounced the executed Charles I as "the last successor of William the Conqueror," came out looking like real English heroes. And of course, there was Robin Hood and his band of merry men living in Sherwood Forest, taking from the rich and giving to the poor—and all the while sticking it to the Sheriff of Nottingham, who would almost certainly have been part of the French-speaking Norman ruling class of the 13th century.

It is Wood's argument that, although the whiggish idea of a grand continuity throughout history went definitively out of vogue in the '70s, we should not discount "the tenacious persistence of oral traditions," and that nations, like children, can be "wounded or inspired by incidents in their birth and early life, reshaping and encoding them as myths which are handed down to serve as warnings or exemplars in later life."

This an excellent and engaging way to set up a book of this kind, and the first few chapters give the reader a great deal to look forward to. It seems a shame, then, that the second part of Wood's book, "Manuscripts and Mysteries," descends into a degree of triviality that often seems hard to justify. Wood is a television presenter, well known to viewers of both PBS and the

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BBC for his 1997 series *In the Footsteps of Alexander the Great*, but in a former life he was a graduate student whose research specialty was Anglo-Saxon history of the 9th and 10th centuries. These two forces—showman and scholar—seem to tug at him throughout this part of the book. He tries to unravel the mysteries of English identity by comparing one manuscript to another and reading between the lines of survey maps. One can almost hear him saying, à la Monty Python, "When we come back, we'll be looking at yet another manuscript of William of Malmesbury, this time a 16th-century version, to see if we can uncover any clues about the lost life of King Athelstan. Stay tuned."

**H**aving said that, there is much to redeem *In Search of England*. An example is the spirited and surprisingly gripping chapter on "the last bowl-turner in England," a man in Berkshire who, until he died in 1957, was not only making traditional pottery using the methods of his 19th-century great-grandfather, as archivists have found, but whose workshed was dug into the ground in the exact spot where it appears pottery had been made since Anglo-Saxon times.

Furthermore, interlarded throughout the book are some remarkable insights about the relationship between history and identity. The English, as Wood points out, unlike the Greeks or the Celts, have never had a proper mythology—there is no English mythology section in the bookstore. Partly this is to do with the fact that

they are a very mixed and very recent "race," if we can call them that. In the absence of an indigenous mythology, they have had to invent myths about their national identity, based on a shared historical imagination.

Certainly Wood has a knack for coming up with some rather surprising connections between Anglo-Saxon and modern times. He recounts the campaign for shorter working days in the 19th century, which claimed King Alfred as a hero because he was known to have divided his day into three eight-hour periods—work, sleep and prayer. And the 10th-century kings Edgar and Athelstan, although they centralized English coinage and allowed only the king's name on coins, also permitted regional designs to appease regional sentiment—a very modern practice when one thinks not only of the new Euro, but also of the new U.S. quarters.

But in the end, Wood's stated goal of using history to shed light on the contemporary anxiety about the place of England is not really met. By producing a book whose main appeal consists of some interesting tidbits and nuggets of elided history, Wood only succeeds in confirming the postmodern suspicion that history no longer really matters. To be fair, he sets himself a difficult task—trying to show the relevance of medieval history to contemporary questions. But then he makes that task even more difficult for himself by delivering a collation of charming, fusty little vignettes with no real driving point.

In many ways, *In Search of England* is the printed companion to what Julian Barnes and others have called the "heritage theme park" of modern England—a sort of Baedeker for a fragmented nationalism. Certainly Wood's timing is good, in the sense that the future of "England" is more unclear than ever. But there is a sense that Wood uses his auspicious timing as an excuse to talk about something whose relevance is never as obvious as he thinks it is. Without a really well articulated sense of purpose, this generally entertaining book comes perilously close to looking like something that fell off the back of a lorry. ■

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# Under the Influence

By Jason Sholl

I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked, / dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix." So begins Allen Ginsberg's 1956 poem "Howl." But it was never just his generation. Since the dawn of recorded history, creative individuals have sought inspiration through mind-altering substances. In *Writing on*

## Writing on Drugs

By Sadie Plant

Farrar, Straus and Giroux  
294 pages, \$24

*Drugs*, Sadie Plant sets out to show how drug users' agile fingers have left their prints all over the Western world.

The first half of *Writing on Drugs* is a literary history. Drug-inspired creativity is one of the writer's most cherished pieces of lore, and much of Plant's material isn't new. Hashish informed Charles Baudelaire's poetry, and mescaline Aldous Huxley's prose. Thomas De Quincey had a fondness for opium, and William Burroughs one for just about anything he could lay his hands on.

But there are also a few surprises. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, for example, coined the word "intensify" to describe opium's effects on his thought. His contemporary Robert Southey greatly enjoyed nitrous oxide, and once remarked that "the atmosphere of the highest of all possible heavens must be composed of this Gas." Wilkie Collins, whose novel *The Moonstone* is widely considered the first full-length modern detective story, was dependent on laudanum. Frankfurt School luminaries Walter Benjamin and Herbert Marcuse believed that hashish "fueled the dreams that revolution could bring true." Sigmund Freud once forewarned his wife of the pleasures she could expect from "a wild man with cocaine in his body." Robert Louis Stevenson wrote *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* over the course of a six-day cocaine binge; a century later, Jack Kerouac wrote *On the Road* on a seven-day benzedrine bender. And during World War

II, amphetamines stoked nearly every speech Churchill and Hitler drafted.

In Plant's view, drugs provided these writers with new insights into the working of the mind, newly discovered fragments of the self, and a new awareness of the limits of conventional ideas. Drugs granted them access to the twilight zones between dreamworld and reality, between the conscious and subconscious minds. But even Plant concedes that no writer fully succeeded in translating these insights onto the printed page. Arthur Koestler could have spoken for the bunch when, following a particularly intense acid trip, he declared: "I solved the secret of the universe last night, but this morning I forgot what it was." Soon after, he decided to stick to booze.

At its best, Plant's tour of literary drug use conveys the possibilities and limitations of writing under the influence: "a privileged state in which the most bizarre discontinuities and chimeras could pass through a mind that would regard them all with calm ambivalence." At its worst, Plant's litany of hemp-smoking bohemians and their sometimes deft prose is an overdose. Others' dreams are notoriously boring, and others' drug experiences are no exception.

Thankfully, Plant's ambitions transcend any simple catalog of drug-inspired writings. In the second half of *Writing on Drugs*, she widens the scope of her study from Western literature to all of culture, arguing that even the soberest individual lives in a world profoundly shaped by drugs. Plant claims a decisive role for drugs in, among other things, the origins of Western philosophy, the legend of Santa Claus, and the reason that Persian carpets and paisley fabrics have the patterns that they do.

Riding sleighs, ancient Siberian herders would follow reindeer to the patches of hallucinogenic mushrooms on which they foraged. "When the deer ate the mushrooms," Plant writes, "the herders would drink their urine, consuming the fly agaric's alkaloids after they were processed by the deer."

Getting "pissed" may now be associated with alcohol, but ancient reindeer herders started the trend. Moreover, Plant continues, millions of children revisit these old shamanic routes every year "when Santa Claus, dressed in red and white, flies through the sky in a sleigh drawn by reindeer bearing gifts from another world."

The lattices, the baroquely infolding spirals, and the kaleidoscopic turbulence of modern tie-dye shirts, Plant claims, find echoes in the intricate patterning of Arabian carpets and the paisley fabric of the Indian subcontinent, not to mention certain recurrent motifs in paleolithic cave art. In more than one bedtime story, Arabian carpets have been known to fly, as have the broomsticks of medieval witches whose potions, probably devoid of bat's blood, almost certainly contained herbs and roots whose effects were magical indeed.

**Add drugs to the hidden forces that disrupt the smooth operation of industrial capitalism.**

Quoting the historian Gordon Wasson, Plant ventures that both ancient theology and modern philosophy were born the night Plato "drunk of the potion in the Temple of Eleusis and [spent] the night seeing the great vision." And after inhaling the hallucinogenic vapors of smoldering herbane, Plant writes, the Oracle at Delphi delivered Oedipus the prophecy that sent him on his tragic way. Some 5,000 years later, Sigmund Freud, himself driven to explain his own reckless cocaine use, seized Oedipus's tale as the basis for one of the 20th century's most influential psychological theories.

Since Freud, psychoanalysis has become a fashionable substitute for drug-fueled explorations of the self, and nearly as expensive and addictive as Freud's drug of choice. Like psychotherapy, Plant contends, modern advertising began as a surrogate for drugs whose use was beginning to be tightly controlled. The Coca-Cola Company was the first big