

A LITTLE QUIZ

- 1) Which French monarch fled France under the pseudonym of Bill Smith and served Queen Victoria as a special constable?
- 2) To which 19th century French author did Shakespeare dictate a new play, in French, because Shakespeare had realised in death the superiority of the French language?
- 3) In one of our countries, manufacturing overtook agriculture in 1840, in the other it took until 1950. Which of us did it when?
- 4) Who said: "The revolution in painting proceeded from Bonnington just as the literary revolution proceeded from Shakespeare?"
- 5) Who introduced the term "bistro" into French culture?
- 6) Who introduced the national dish to France?
- 7) How many times was France invaded by hostile foreigners between 1814 and 1940?
- 8) Who surveyed the corpses after a particularly blood-soaked battle and said: "One night in Paris will replace that lot"?
- 9) Who wept at the casualty lists the morning after Waterloo?
- 10) What proportion of mid-eighteenth century French generals were from the ranks of the nobility?
- 11) Which of us never had the Inquisition? And had a greater parliamentary franchise in 1540 than the other had in 1840? And won eighty five per cent of all military and naval battles between us?

ANSWERS AT BOTTOM.

There are a number of facts about France that she doesn't understand because no one has taken the trouble to force her face into them. She has no real appetite for the satirical introspection that we habitually indulge in. British self-deprecation is reflected in the dark mirror as French pride. They think too much of themselves and we think too little.

These are local traits. Whenever some great national anniversary comes up our satirists and contrarians compete to present it the other way round. Magna Carta? It was just to secure the aristocracy's inheritance rights. Elizabeth I? At it like a weasel with half the court. The Spanish Armada? The weather won it. Trafalgar? Napoleon had already decided not to invade. The second world war? That's more difficult, what with the Holocaust, but people can still call it Churchill's vainglory that bankrupted the country, and - considering what he did to the French fleet - argue for him to be arraigned at Nuremberg with the other war criminals.

France doesn't beat herself up like this. Not in discourse, as they like to say. They celebrate their defeats (unlike us, we dwell on our the victories we snatched against enormous odds). Victor Hugo claimed the hero of Waterloo was . . . General Cambonne. This was the officer who said that "the Guard died but didn't surrender" (he did surrender, incidentally, and was made a viscount by Louis XVIII). The French take this wallowing-in-defeat tendency to extremes, perhaps as a result of the extremities they've been driven to. Jules Michelet described the tragedy of revolutionary France as the "blood and tears she gave to all, saying: Take, drink, this is my Blood." Consider that. France as a crucified God, a saviour who has sacrificed herself in order to redeem mankind. The English couldn't begin to think of the words to look for the thought to start to express such a thing about themselves.

No, France is tender about historical idiocies and humiliations that we – in our modest,

practical, savagely self-deprecating way – take in our stride. French, for instance, didn't become the official language of France until the sixteenth century (for England the first parliamentary Bill in English was 1327) is the sort of thing we would accept at once.

France is irritated when we mention it, as though it's a weakness, an affront to their ancient dignity.

At various time the king of England has owned a third of France. This is not well taught in schools over there. You could walk across Normandy, the Loire, through the Aquitaine to the Pyrenees on land owned by the English king. This irritates them when it's pointed out. It's subversive of their glory. It corrodes their self-respect, somehow, that the English infant Henry VI (son of the victor of Agincourt) was King of France for some years, crowned in Notre Dame and reigning from his cradle.

Actually, these things do sting. When I bring up the subject of England owning half of France, they have an argument against me. "England owned France? You mean your King . . . William? You call him the Conqueror, don't you? We don't call him that. Am I right in thinking he was one of our little dukes? Of Normandy, you say? Did he conquer you? I'd forgotten. Maybe you might have forgotten if Scotland conquered Norway. Oh, Norway conquered you as well, did it? Conquering England was the popular thing to do in those days was it? Could everyone "have a go"?"

How jolly! No, let me instruct you. William was a feudal vassal of the King of France. He was merely a tenant-in-chief of lands granted to him in Normandy, he was one of our smaller tenants. Have you been to Normandy? Very backward. When he conquered England, your country became the property of our king. You didn't own one square centimetre of France. As the law stood, the vassal William delivered the whole of England to be the property of Henri premier, and then when he died, England became the vassal of Louis VI and then when he died, England became the vassal of Louis VII, and then . . ." But my interlocutor abruptly falls silent. I have killed him.

Yes, when I learned that Prince Louis of France invaded England ~ landed, got to London, was welcomed there and proclaimed king in the very year after Magna Carta (it was all news to me) ~ I felt a stab of pain. I'm fine now, but I can see it's not as easy as it ought to be to absorb and process these national facts into the narrative we make for ourselves.

So the riposte to this book will dwell a lot on massacres in Ireland, Culloden, the enclosures, witch-burning, rotten boroughs, imperial atrocities. I am certainly not saying Britain is morally superior to France, or even nationally superior to France. I say we tend to lead the way, and France has, historically, followed. Her lack of glory, culture, cleverness notwithstanding, Britain has usually been the leader. Obviously, from the last years of the seventeenth century we have represented the modern world. We led Europe into modernity. The way we were set up - the virtues that our institutions encouraged - they all pushed for change, experiment, democracy, science, innovation, trade, progress, liberty. It's not clear that this national comparison is holding very true just at the moment, but judging from the last three hundred years it's probably the way to bet for the next three hundred. That's for another time. For now, let us remember how intimate the bonds between us are.

++Large numbers of older English people live in France; large numbers of younger French people work in England. Historically, England has held the secret of prosperity, and France the secret of living well.

++Without its French component, the English language would be ridiculous.

++The modern English state was created by a Frenchman. Let's not argue about it, he

was French enough, after a hundred and fifty years of living in Normandy.

++Byron (et alia) hero-worshipped Napoleon. We can all see why.

++When the British army invaded Spain during the Peninsular war, one British officer's straying greyhounds were returned to him by the French on the other side of the front line. If captured British officers skipped their parole in Belgium and escaped to England, they were sent back to French captivity by their angry colonels.

++When the British lost the American War of Independence, General Cornwallis surrendered at Yorktown by giving his sword to the French commander, not to General Washington. And General Rochambaud lent the English General money to help him out of a hole (infuriating the Americans). The French and the English looked down equally on the colonial troops that were fighting for or against.

++The French mourned the death of Captain Cook in 1779 almost as much as did Britain.

++French fashions have been eagerly adopted in England, and English fashions have gone the other way as well. Marie Antoinette's shepherdess style was English. They flocked to the Cafe Anglais in Paris; we flocked to the Cafe de Paris in London. And all that sensibility stuff in the eighteenth century was started by Samuel Richardson.

++Inspired by English way of education, Emile Boutmy founded the Ecole Libre des Science Politique ~ and the London School of Economics was copied from it.

++The proceeds from the sale of Louisiana went into the war against the British. The funds passed through Barings bank in London on their way to Napoleon.

++After the French Revolution, England took in as many as eighty thousand French refugees. We got Pugin (who designed the House of Commons) and our greatest civil engineer (Brunel). Meanwhile, English dissenters, catholics and satirists found a ready home in France.

++The Duke of Dorset left his cricket bat with Marie Antoinette.

++And blow me down, look at this, direct from the court of Louis XIV, words by Mme de Brinon:

Grand Dieu sauvez le roi

Grand Dieu vengez le roi

Vive le roi

Qu'a jamais glorieux

Louis victorieux

Voie ses ennemis toujours soumis

Vive le roi

I'd no idea we were so much in France's debt.

That's enough of that. It's a bit of sugar to help this medicine go down. Let's start on the therapeutic journey. I don't know how France is going to bear up; we'll have to be brave for both of us. But don't enjoy yourselves too much, you English, because there's a horrible surprise at the end (after the catalogue of English and then British supremacy, blow me down, wins).

But let's begin with some easy, five-finger exercises. Let us go through a dozen distant and relatively easy French national experiences. We can help our friends process these, in the first instance, by helping her face up to their existence. Once we have done what we can there, then a number of more obviously relevant but unpalatable truths can be digested.

The Albigensian Crusade began in 1209 and finished finally in 1271. This still has the power to make modern readers recoil. It is one of the first complete disasters to befall Europe, demonstrating to subsequent tyrants the fact that genocide works. In thirty six battles and sieges, half a million indigenous French citizens were killed over fifty

years, communities were wiped out, the Inquisition was founded. In recognition of his services to torture and slaughter, the founder of the Dominicans (the dogs of God) was made a saint.

The Cathars were a movement of Christian fundamentalists in the south of France who believed in the Manichean idea that God made the spirit and the Devil made the body. Their leaders were celibate vegetarians who lived in poverty. They offered quite significant rights and respect for women. They were tolerant of others, particularly Jews. They didn't have much time for clergy. They were proto-Protestants, perhaps. The pope of the day demanded they be eliminated and decreed that Cathar land and possessions could be legally taken by the king of France and northern nobles. The carnage was remarkable, even by medieval standards. Though Beziers harboured only five hundred Cathars the entire population had their throats cut or were burned alive in their cathedral sanctuary.

When asked how to distinguish between Cathars and Catholics, the commander uttered the famous words: "Caedite eos! Novit enim Dominus qui sunt eius" or "Kill them all and let God sort it out." These sentiments were echoed by the Committee of Public Safety over five hundred years later, in the Revolutionary courts around Provence. The papal legate reported twenty thousand had been killed (though he may have been exaggerating, to make himself more popular).

The Simon de Montfort who behaved so badly in these crusades was Earl of Leicester but was French by birth, breeding and residence. It was his son who played a prominent role in British parliamentary history.

The Trial of Joan of Arc. Ask any Frenchman and you'll be told that the British killed this charismatic battle leader. It's true, of course, but the following should also be noted. The judge at her ridiculous proceedings was Bishop Cauchon, the inquisitor Jean LeMaitre was attended by Notary Boisguillaume, the clergy in attendance at her burning were Martin Ladvenu and Isambart de la Pierre, the executioner was Geoffroy Therage. It's hard not to notice that these aren't Anglo-Saxon names. Of course they were following the instructions of the English, but St Joan (canonised when the English had gone back home) was tried, condemned and executed by French collaborators.

In victory, British statesmen have often been more decent than strictly necessary to the French. In 1763, at the end of the Seven Years War (which gave global supremacy to Britain) the peace treaty took pains to restore France her possessions. We said we were "over-colonised" and restored her Caribbean colonies to her. After Waterloo we did the same and arranged matters in a way that inspired great contempt from Napoleon. "Castlereagh had the continent at his mercy . . . And he made peace as if he had been defeated. The imbecile!" But then, we followed French advice after World War One and immediately created the conditions for World War Two. It was quite in character that we put de Gaulle at the head of the French battalions sent in ahead to liberate Paris. His first speech "untroubled by magnanimity" as one historian noted, announced that Paris had been "liberated by itself, liberated by its people, with the help of the armies of France, with the support and help of the whole of France, of France that is fighting, of France alone."

France alone? Paris was liberated by France alone? Let's move along before we get annoyed, leaving behind the spiteful observation that more French soldiers fought on Hitler's side in the second world war than for the allies.

Quite well into the Enlightenment, a lunatic tried to stab Louis XV. The blade hardly penetrated, and the king didn't mind much, but the would-be assassin was executed as an attempted regicide. The intervention of Voltaire and the disapproval of the

philosophes failed to commute the sentence to ordinary torture and beheading. Damiens had already been extensively tortured before being brought to the place of execution. There, red hot pincers were used to tear his flesh open for molten lead and boiling oil to be poured into the wounds. The hand holding the knife he'd used was dressed in boiling sulphur. His arms and legs were fastened to horses who pulled in different directions for some hours. Because his joints wouldn't give way, the MPs ordered his tendons be cut. His still living trunk was then burnt at the stake in the normal way. The best viewing sets for the execution went for a hundred livres.

British justice could be brutal for treason, and hanging, drawing and quartering was not unknown, though infrequently carried out to its full extent. Nor did Britain at this time have cruel and unusual punishments like "breaking on the wheel", in which a man would be executed by being tied to a cartwheel to have his limbs methodically smashed with a hammer. (A footnote: A century later, Queen Victoria suffered thirteen assassination attempts; not one of the would-be assassins was executed. A second footnote: Casanova was watching and witnessed his friend penetrating a lady from behind during the execution; she was too embarrassed to protest. (This is entirely irrelevant).

At a time when the Common Law had been instituted in England with habeas corpus, jury trial and regular assizes, France would quite often put animals on trial. And not domestic or commercial animals who damaged property. No, the alphabetical list of defendants from 1266 on includes asses, beetles, bulls, caterpillars, cocks, cows, dogs, dolphins, eels, field mice, flies, goats, grasshoppers, horses, insects, leeches, locusts, moles, rats, serpents, sheep, slugs, snails, termites, turtledoves, weevils, wolves and worms. In 1457, a sow was hanged for murder, but her six blood-spattered sucklings were acquitted.

A swarm of rats was formally prosecuted in 1522 and defended by a lawyer, one Bartholomew Chassennee. The rats failed to appear in court – their attorney argued that the summons hadn't been read in all the relevant parishes. The court agreed and had the summons more widely read. The rats still failed to appear and Chassennee argued it was the difficulty of the journey and fear of cats that prevented them attending court. The case was the making of Chassennee's career and he later became president of the Parlement de Provence.

In 1576 – the weevil case summoned all the weevils to answer for their crimes against the wine industry in St Julien. Their attorney Pierre Rembaud defended the weevils by reference to their rights in Genesis. Land was then set aside for the weevils but counsel rejected it as insufficiently fertile for his clients' needs. This is all amusing, even endearing. Michel Foucault explained it as the medieval mind in the midst of death, searching for "rituals intended to integrate it, to make it acceptable and to give meaning" to their existence. They also allowed "explanatory narratives to be explored".

But look: mens rea had been a feature of English law since King Ine's law in 600 AD concerning the killing of intruders in the home. Here we are eight hundred years later and provincial France was using the law as a medieval mystery play to bring therapeutic solace to the people.

A renaissance in science in England was about to produce an explanation rather than an explanatory narrative for the world..

How many French icons can be numbered in the top three of each of the cultural divisions? Fewer than we'd think for the cultural arbiters of Europe, and therefore the

world. Aren't the big three composers German? Or Germanic? In painting ~ of course, the Impressionists, but in fact the big three disruptive painters in western culture are Italian, aren't they? Perhaps with some Dutch competition coming in from below? I'm not even trying to put Turner and Constable in there for fear of outraging the status quo, but if they didn't make the Impressionists possible they certainly made them more likely. Who else? The big three literary figures are English and Russian, wouldn't we say? Scientists? Not a French name within coo-ee of the top three, I fear. Philosophy? We might find room for Descartes in the top three if we ignore the Greeks. Great monarchs? Charlemagne? He was German. Louis XIV? He would have been in the running if he hadn't left his country bankrupt and on the road to revolution. Military figures. There is Napoleon. Napoleon must be in the top three, third only to the Russian Generals Janvier and Fevrier. No, that's a silly joke. We must grant Napoleon as greatest general of the modern world . . . and the last attractive dictator. But remember that eight out of ten of the world's poorest countries are governed by the Code Napoleon: and that this is not coincidence. Don't forget either, the consolidating effect of Napoleon on the Holy Roman Empire and how he helped create Germany (and all that that entailed, from 1871 on).

What else? The great cultural movements in Europe.

The Renaissance? Italian. The Reformation? German and English. The Industrial Revolution? English. The Age of Reason (aka the Long Enlightenment) Scotland and England. The Enlightenment itself? England had already moved on the Age of Sentiment (and then Romanticism). The greatest chefs, surely? France certainly had them, whoever they were.

The greatest pastry chefs, possibly? Yes, oh yes. Dress makers?

Necessarily. France may be losing the crown for white wine, but their reds are still beyond competition. So all is not dust, by any means.

Elite goods are very French, very successful.

All this is arguable, you say. Very well: The statistics give us a more objective picture. Let's look at some figures.

In the matter of Nobel prizes, for instance, which universities have produced the most awards? Let's count them. Top of the tree is Cambridge with seventy graduates and eighty one affiliates. Then we have five American universities before Oxford with forty seven graduates as Nobel laureates. Then there are the two American universities, a German one, then four American, a Swiss, the University of Manchester, then an American, then University College London, six American, then Uppsala University in Finland, then Imperial College in London and the London School of Economics, a private research organization, two more universities and at last we come to the first French entry in 30th place. The finest educational establishment in France, the famous Ecole Normale Superieure. They have nine representatives The University of Paris is the only other French institution with any laureates at all (four).

Uppsala University has more Nobel prize winning graduates than the Ecole Normale and the University of Paris combined. So does Imperial College in London.

Minnesota University in the deep midwest of America has more Nobel prize winners than the Ecole Normale. Five English universities have produced Nobel prize winners compared with two French ones.

In total, France has produced thirty five Nobel prize winners compared with Britain's eighty eight. If we include the winners who became naturalised in our respective countries, France gets an extra nine and Britain gets an extra twenty three. So should

we say the score is Britain one hundred and eleven to France's forty four? Or should it be the more modest score of Britain eighty eight to France's thirty five?

You decide.

We really have to bear down on this. Here are some facts that crop up when you look at the history. When they go together it gives us a very particular picture ~ and not necessarily familiar one ~ of our neighbour

It is a little-noted fact that France's sad national decline began in 1704. After the defeat at Blenheim (and Ramillies, Oudenard and Malplaquet), power swung away from the gilded, glorious court at Versailles – swung westwards, to barbarous and perfidious Britain and eventually to satanic America.

It was a cataclysm. And this is essential for France to recognise. The age of cataclysms hasn't left us; we may be on the edge of another one.

It gives the study of eighteenth century France a little spike of modern fear. History may very well repeat itself. The same sort of things may happen in the same sort of way, and for the same sort of reasons. First, a boom in production creates wealth. That creates space for a willed ignorance. This permits a perverse interpretation of hostile events; then, perhaps, a self-servingly intellectual approach to reality forgives commercial failure to adapt . . . we "lose control of the discourse". That was the pattern of pre-Revolutionary France.

After the opulence of the seventeenth century France struggled to keep up appearances while Britain stripped her of her possessions. She enterprised English and Scottish ideas into her own Enlightenment, but that didn't engender liberty or fraternity just vast, national terror.

While the eighteenth century can be twisted, pruned and propagandised into a heroic narrative, the nineteenth century can't. Quite within the run of play, that was obviously the British century and France suffered grievously in every conceivable way (the number of domestic cess pits in Paris in 1850 is a shock for all civilised people).

In the 18th century, France bankrupted herself to help America win the war of Independence ~ but America immediately reverted to being Britain's main trading partner. Dozens of French generals were guillotined (it encouraged the others). France was shattered by the Revolutionary wars. Whatever its benefits, the revolution was one of the most ghastly national experiences of western Europe, and its aftermath was more than a disaster for France, it was a catastrophe. She lost a hundred and thirty nine of her battle ships (we lost one). We lost two per cent of our merchant navy; France lost eighty five per cent of hers.

In 1850, Britain had ten times the number of steamships that France had.

From the beginning of the modern era – say, after 1700 – the military score card allows almost nothing to French gloire-addicts. In the following century, there were forty five significant battles between us and thirty nine British victories to six French ones (only one of them significant).

It may be that French literary readers may be able to construe those words in some more gloire-producing fashion so let us render the score in a more starkly numerical way as: 39-6.

One fundamental failure resulted in all these other multiple failures.

And it must be acutely painful for France because the failure can be laid at the door of the people she is most proud of: her intellectuals.

What a mess they made of things with their new ideas, their exaltation of Reason, their naivety, their lack of experience of the world of power.

If we want to excuse the intellectuals, we can say that their failure was the result of a

general failure of France's institutions. She rocked from one extreme to another with no sense of balance or counterweight.

When her estates clashed, one smashed the other. The dukes dominated the king. The king got the upper hand and dominated them back. The Church had dissenters burnt. The army overwhelmed the government.

Revolutionaries killed everyone they could. All this crushing and counter-crushing kept the country backward, tyrannical and not very clean.

The instability was systematic. Thus their constitutional history from 1788 reveals: Monarchy – Republic – Emperor – Monarchy – July Monarchy – Republic – Empire – Republic – Vichy – Bits and Pieces – Fourth Republic – Fifth Republic. Twelve constitutions in two hundred years.

Between 1815 and 1870, I'm not sure how many rulers fled to England.

Louis Philippe, the Bourgeois King, died in a bath chair in St

Leonards-on-Sea. Napoleon III died in Chislehurst. Charles X tried England (and then, bizarrely, Prague where he caught cholera and died)

Napoleon II fled somewhere else, Austria.

It's a circus. Britain's development looks dull in comparison. But at the end of the process, Britain ruled the world while France made large but limited gestures (a steel warship, the Eiffel tower, Syria).

When you lay it out, it's astonishing but from 1763 to the second world war, France had a revolution or a coup or a thumping national defeat practically every decade.

Every ten years, a disaster. It is very much to her credit that she has done so well.

Look at this:

1760s: France's defeat in the Seven Years War, at the height of her glory, relieved her of any ambitions for global supremacy. From India (Plassey) to North America (Quebec) to the West Indies (the Saints which we gave back), to mainland Europe (Minden and Quiberon Bay) France's presence (but not her prestige) was crushed.

1770s: Funding anti-British activity to help American revolutionaries gave her the status of America's first ally, but it helped destroy France's finances. More important, when the war was over France failed to establish a useful commercial relationship with the new country.

That, pre-eminence infuriatingly, bewilderingly, remained with Britain.

1780s: National bankruptcy, amongst other things, produced the Revolution. The Terror. The execution of one absolute monarch and his replacement with another authority so terrible as to defeat all idealism. Blood everywhere. Hundreds of thousands killed (the guillotine, the Vendee, the endless wars).

1790s: The Revolution swung from the Enragees to the Jeunesse D'oree.

Having got rid of an absolute monarch, the revolutionaries embraced an Emperor. He provided such stunning victories against everyone – almost everyone – that France's head was turned.

1800s: National catastrophe: Although Napoleon ruled Europe from the Baltic to the Mediterranean her naval power was annihilated. And Nemesis was moving up through the Peninsula.

1810s: National catastrophe in Russia. Napoleon's army not annihilated only because the Russians hated the British more than they hated the French. Two-thirds of French army allowed back, to contain the British (a task that eluded them).

1814: National catastrophe in France. Paris invaded and occupied.

1815: National catastrophe at Waterloo. Paris invaded and occupied.

1830s: Another revolution. The July monarchy presided over a national moral decline, as the bien-pensants had it (the regime was a "joint stock company established to loot

France”).

1840s. Another revolution.

1870s: After two successful (if autocratic) decades, France’s ambitions to dominate Europe suffer a setback when the Prussians invaded her, laid siege to Paris, shelled it, occupied it, and went home with Alsace-Lorraine.

1910s: National catastrophe: Germany invaded France.

1940s: National catastrophe: Germany invaded Paris. French naval power annihilated (by the British). The agony of collaboration.

It’s amazing, when you count the catastrophes up like that. The facts are well known one by one but the narrative was new to me. When we absorb the story we should be astonished. Try a thought experiment. If these convulsions had happened in England every decade would we have coped? Would we have handled them? Would we have prospered as France did? I don’t think so. Our greatest civil disorder in the nineteenth century, “Peterloo” resulted in just twelve deaths. And it still resonates today in British political history, when certain interests want to muster civic indignation. The eighteenth century isn’t atypical, it was in the ordinary course of Anglo-French relations. Her ambitions were the highest; her successes brilliant but she failed to sustain an enduring supremacy for one reason. She had no realistic conception of liberty.

And that takes us back to England.

ANSWERS

- 1) King Louis Phillipe, who abdicated and sought asylum in England after his services were no longer required in France.
- 2) Victor Hugo, in exile in Britain. He also said: “When England wishes to converse with me it will learn to speak French”?
- 3) France manufacturing industry was 110 years less advanced
- 4) Theophile Gautier, French poet, novelist, and critic.
- 5) The Russian troops occupying Paris in 1814. Napoeon had instilled the need for prompt service when he was in Moscow two years before.
- 6) The Duke of Wellington’s army introduced steak frites during his regency in Paris after Waterloo.
- 7) Five: 1814, 1815, 1870, 1914, 1940. In four of those five invasions, Paris itself was occupied.
- 8) Napoleon
- 9) Wellington
- 10) Eighty three per cent (of 151 French generals there were eight princes, 11 dukes, 38 marquises, 48 counts, six barons and 14 chevaliers).
- 11) If you don’t know you had really better buy this book.