



The Angry Island: Hunting the English

A. A. Gill

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The default setting of England is anger. The English are naturally, congenitally, collectively and singularly, livid much of the time. In between the incoherent bellowing of the terraces and the pursed, rigid eye-rolling of the commuter carriage, they reach the end of their tethers and the thin end of their wedges. They're incensed, incandescent, splenetic, prickly, touchy and fractious. They can be mildly annoyed, really annoyed and, most scarily, not remotely annoyed. They sit apart on their half of a damply disappointing little island, nursing and picking at their irritations. Perhaps aware that they're living on top of a keg of fulminating fury, the English have, throughout their history, come up with hundreds of ingenious and bizarre ways to diffuse anger or transform it into something benign. Good manners and queues, roundabouts and garden sheds, and almost every game ever invented from tennis to bridge. They've built things, discovered stuff, made puddings, written hymns and novels, and for people who don't like to talk much, they have come up with the most minutely nuanced and replete language ever spoken - just so there'll be no misunderstandings. The English itch inside their own skins. They feel foreign in their own country and run naked through their own heads. They are often admirable but rarely loveable. An Englishman's greatest achievement is in resisting his national inclinations and not going crazy with an axe in a cul-de-sac. This book hunts down the causes and the results of being the Angry Island.

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