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H.V. Morton , Jan Morris

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Currently in its 40th printing with its original publisher in the UK, this is the book that one British newspaper has called "travel writing at its best. Bill Bryson must weep when he reads it." Whether describing ruined gothic arches at Glastonbury or hilarious encounters with the inhabitants of Norfolk, Morton recalls a way of life far from gone even at the beginning of a new century.

In Search Of England Details

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D.N. says

Morton's travelogue is the ne plus ultra of travel writing. He's the master of the genre, and his work here is the measure of it. Morton has earned his popularity by capturing the sights, sounds, and splendour of England as it was in the 1920's with aplomb. It's a joy to read this pleasant tour of bridges, forests, pubs, village greens, and eccentric characters.

Alan Shaw says

This is a truly delightful little travelogue of a somewhat idiosyncratic journey. My Folio Society edition has wonderfully apt and quirky illustrations scattered throughout. Yes, perhaps, some of the comments aren't quite in step with current pc-illiberalism but then as L. P. Hartley put it "the past is a foreign country; they do things differently there." There is much joy and wonder and thankfulness spread throughout the book. And there is much in the reporting of human nature that reminds me at least that the things that truly deeply matter in human life don't change - and even last night sitting in my local village pub hearing snatches of conversation what concerns us all doesn't change much either.

In the final pages of the book Morton recounts the vicar of a small village talking "progress" such as modern methods of communication, in this instance newspapers, which bring 'the latest murders every Sunday morning. Even that has not altered us much: the newspapers are only another kind of fairy story about the world outside.' See - maybe so much hasn't changed after all.

Kate says

"H. V. Morton made his name as one of the twentieth century's most wonderfully companionable travel writers with *In Search of England*, a book which has been through countless impressions and still stands as possibly the very best introduction to the country and its people.

"'I have gone round England like a magpie,' writes Morton, 'picking up the bright things that pleased me. A glance at the route followed will prove that this is not a guide book, and a glance at the contents will expose me to the scorn of local patriots who will see, with incredulous rage, that on many an occasion I passed silently through their favorite village. That was inevitable. It was a moody holiday, and I followed the roads; some of them led me aright and some astray. The first were the most useful; the others were the most interesting.'

"A vivid, engaging, witty and informative as it was on its first publication over seventy years ago, Morton's *In Search of England* ... like his books on Wales, Scotland and Ireland ... remains both an essential introduction to the country, and a sheer delight for anyone interested in the very best that travel writing can offer."

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It was indeed a wonderful book, full of odd nooks and crannys, unexpected delights, and whimsical musings. If anything, it was too short -- most villages were covered in just a few pages, leaving me hungry to know more.

Vera says

This book was published in 1935, based on the author's travels in the 1920s, so this aspect was interesting, and when the comparison is made to our lives today it is even more so. The author is treated to a wireless evening one night, which was apparently a big thing in the village he was in. Radio was not a household thing in those days, and the reception wasn't too good, but still, it's hard to imagine the world he traveled in. The writing is good, and he finds human interest in all sorts of things, and helps the reader visualize the past as he goes through historic areas. Good read.

Nick says

I enjoyed accompanying Morton around England. This was a relaxing read, and a bit of a travel classic. Apparently, you can still get a free glass of beer at that monastery he mentions...

Val says

The England H V Morton is searching for is one untouched by the Industrial Revolution, which took some hunting for even in 1927. He revels in anywhere which has kept its sense of history. He tries to capture that history and give the feel of the places he visits.

Many of the places he visits are well known, on the 'tourist trail'; a few are quiet backwaters. I know all the places in the first three chapters very well, those in the next four well enough to recognise and have visited most of the rest at least once. Many details have changed since he wrote about these places, but this book is not about the details, it is about the atmosphere of each corner of England and that is often unchanged. There were many times when I thought he captured perfectly that atmosphere, that feel of a place, that sense of history, that England.

Morton motors around England from city to town to village, stops and chats to locals and tourists, ogles a few young women, relishes a few garrulous old men, diverts down country lanes which take his fancy and stays in a selection of hotels, inns and private houses. Nothing very exciting happens, but he makes that very lack of excitement appealing.

This is a charming book.

It is very much his journey, he does not attempt to give an unbiased view, but he draws the reader in to travel with him and see England through his eyes and I enjoyed his company on the journey.

Sheila says

Read at the same time as another book. First published in 1964 it gives a glimpse of the many varieties of English culture and traditions. The author travels the length and breadth of England talking to locals and seeing the sights. A good read. I was born in Manchester, England and lived in Britain until 1977 and although I have travelled back many times to many different places, I enjoyed his idiosyncratic style of writing and learned many new things.

Greg says

H. V. Morton starts the book with the reason why he wrote it. Believing he was dying in Palestine, and in pain, the style of his writing is established by him describing his homesickness for England, forgetting the pain in his neck for the pain in his heart.

He realised he hadn't written about his home country and he knew so little about England. He had wandered the world and neglected things near at home.

He vowed to go in search of England.

Travelling by car he starts his journey in the south where Christianity entered Britain and ends in the north.

Written in beautiful prose, a charming, elegant style of writing. His style takes one back to that time.

Reading it brought English music to mind, even Donovan and Pink Floyd. Reading through *In Search of England* again, it's the expressions and words of the time that have been forgotten that stand out, like 'Jove's bolts!' The vernacular of the times, the early Twentieth century, written in 1927. I have a hardcover 1949 edition still with its dust jacket printed in Great Britain which is most appropriate, I think, by Jove.

Travel writing is a flexible genre - compare H.V. Morton to Bill Bryson. Bryson is good at bringing humour into his observations. Morton is the master at illustrating the character of a place. The people, the towns and it's ways, always with interesting details of history, and not just his native land but with all his books. I recommend 'In Search of Italy', 'A Traveller in Rome', and 'A Stranger in Spain'. (I've only started on Spain). Interesting to learn about Portland quarries. The stone that built London.

When I read "...English cities through whose streets history has been flowing for centuries...." I think Britain and the English language have given the world so much.

Nigeyb says

In Search Of England by H.V. Morton

After many years abroad, H.V. Morton set out one morning in the mid-1920s, in his Morris two-seater car, on a tour of his home country.

This book was published on 2nd June 1927. It is now in its 40th printing with its original publisher in the UK. One British newspaper described the book as "travel writing at its best. Bill Bryson must weep when he reads it." I agree. The book is an absolute delight. The best travel writing inspires the reader to want to go and visit the places described. I came away from this book with a list of places to visit, or revisit. I was also inspired to look up many of the places he visited online. Many still look every bit as charming as H.V. Morton's descriptions.

H.V. Morton was writing at a time when people were less mobile. Interestingly he still describes traffic jams in the Lake District, and seems to encounter American tourists wherever he goes. He also stumbles across many old customs and skills that would have been in their death throes at the time he was writing, for example he describes flint-knappers in Norfolk, a skill that was already all but extinct.

Morton's writing is frequently sublime. It is fairly obvious that the reality cannot have been quite so perfect and that he must have made up some of the account. As the trauma of World War One started to diminish I suspect many readers wanted this type of pleasing portrait of England as a place of tradition, stability, history, country lanes, village greens, outstanding beauty, quirky characters and traditional pubs serving warm ale and cheese. The book's conclusion perfectly illustrates this romanticised view:

"I went out into the churchyard where the green stones nodded together, and I took up a handful of earth and felt it crumble and run through my fingers, thinking that as long as one English field lies against another there is something left in the world for a man to love.

'Well', smiled the vicar as he walked towards me between the yew trees, 'that, I am afraid, is all we have'.

'You have England', I said."

It is interesting to consider the extent to which it is acceptable to embellish or romanticise accounts of travel. For me it matters not a jot and I have no hesitation in recommending this delightful book.

Julie Durnell says

An enchanting journey through old England, Mr. Morton's meanderings and interactions with the village folk he meets along the way are nothing but enchanting!

Michelle says

I am madly in love with H. V. Morton. (I refuse to give credence to those spurious claims that he was a philanderer and an anti-Semite.) I picture him driving in his sporty two-seater through the rolling hills of England, accompanied by a healthy knowledge of history, a playful imagination, and an eye for the beautiful. He starts each chapter with a most adorable summary:

Chapter One

I go in search of England. Describes how I leave the Place Where London Ends, meet a bowl-turner, stand beneath a gallows on a hill, enter Winchester, accept the wanderer's dole at St. Cross, and ends, quite properly, with a maiden in distress.

My 2002 edition had an insightful intro by Jan Morris, in which she cautions against trying to use this as a travel guide:

In Search of England is most decidedly a period piece, and that is half its charm. Foreigners who may be tempted to use it as a guide to modern England--even as a guide to the contemporary English flavor--will be stupefyingly disillusioned. . . . Not much that Morton describes or suggests is recognizable in today's England, beyond the bare bones of it, or the echo.

In a way, of course, she is right: gone are the days of pleasure drives and pockets of countryside untouched by industrialization, old women who comb the beach for clams, and evenings gathered beside the town's only radio.

But on the other hand, the fact that Morton had, even in 1927, to search for those pockets of tradition makes the time seem not so far away. And each time I looked a place or a custom up, unsure if it even existed in the present day, I found that it did.

In the first chapter, he visits the last traditional wood bowl-turner in England (a product called "treen"). Did he in fact catch a glimpse of an art that would die with its last practitioner? No! Today, (aptly named) Robin Wood has revived the tradition. (A bit romantically, Morton quotes the bowl-turner in his book as saying "unless you learn when you're a lad you can never catch the knack of it"; but it seems that Robin Wood has done just this.)

In Cornwall, he comes upon the Helston Floral, or Furry Dance, a parade and dance practiced since pagan times. Even Morton encounters "great crowds from all parts of the West Country." Today, the tradition continues.

Perhaps we can no longer visit Tintagel alone on a windy evening, borrowing a key from a lady in a tearoom, but plenty from Morton's world persists today. In many ways, the Twenties were the beginning of the modern era, and this, one of the first modern travel memoirs, is a lovely reminder of that.

Susan says

While ill and abroad, the author found that he missed England with a passion and, on his return, set out to find his version of the rural idyll. This is the story of his travels, by motor car, around England, which was first published in 1927. The 1920's were a time when coach trips were extremely popular and had made much of the countryside open to more people - even more so than the railways. The author both extols the delights of popular travel, while bemoaning the 'vulgarization' of the country. Although delightful, this is certainly not an unbiased version of the authors travels - his thoughts are clear for all to see. If he doesn't like a place, finds fault with a tourist spot or is unhappy, then you will certainly know about it. For example, he enters Wigan, "expecting the worst" and finds Norfolk, "the most suspicious county in England." Despite his many stereotypes and personal biases though, he is generally enthusiastic and willing to be pleased, as he strikes up endless conversations and searches out people and places of interest.

As the author says himself, it is a curious characteristic of the English scenery to change in a few miles. We certainly see a range of places through his eyes, from Stonehenge, to Dartmoor, the ruins of Glastonbury, Hadrian's Wall and endless inns, cathedrals and churches. Although this was written so long ago, it is reassuring to see that the generation gap was still the same, with a cockle gatherer claiming that they were the last of their kind as, "girls today want to be ladies.... and they don't like hard work either." Whether ill and writing essays while, "under the influence of a cocaine pill and a raw egg" or being side tracked by women luring him into teashops, "I believe the Crusades could have been stopped by a Dorsetshire tea," he is wonderful company. This travel book is a delight and will show you the England between the wars with a most enthusiastic and illuminating guide.

Tony says

Morton, H. V. IN SEARCH OF ENGLAND. (1927; this ed. 2002). *****. Morton, born in 1892 near Manchester, was a prolific writer of articles and travel literature. It helped that his father was the editor of the Birmingham Mail and that he started his own career on the rival Birmingham Express at the age of 17. After a stint with the Warwickshire Yeomanry during WW I, he went back to his writing career. His first major success was in reporting the discovery of Tutankhamun's Tomb. After that, he was given the opportunity to write a series of vignettes about London life for the Daily Express. These later appeared in book form in the 1920s under the titles, "The Heart of London," and "The Spell of London." This book, which was first published in 1927, collected his essays written when he took a motor trip around England to discover the English countryside. In those days, there weren't a lot of main roads, but, then, there weren't a lot of cars either. Tourist traffic had started in a small way, but Morton managed to avoid the crowds and discover the essence of each English city he visited. I'm not sure how long he took on this trip, but it had to be more than a month. He always talked with the locals and explored many of the arts soon to be lost to the encroaching urbanization of the countryside. He managed to visit the antiquities of each town – especially the churches

and cathedrals – and to impart to his readers the sense of history embodied in all of them. His history retelling was not the dull type of English history we encountered in school, but a lively fusion of history, myth, and heritage that survived to his day. I wish I had found this book before I had taken any of my jaunts around England. It would have made my travels so much more informative and enjoyable. There is lots of humor in his observations, too. Not the slap your thighs type, but the typical droll, dry humor for which the English are famous. If you are looking for more humor, then you should look to writers like Bill Bryson, but please don't ignore this book. Find a copy for yourself and take it with you. Highly recommended.

Jodi says

In Search of England was a wonderful book to read to invoke nostalgia for what England had been. Although this book was written in 1926, it was rather devoid of the scars (literal and psychological) of World War I, which surprised me but again is what made the book such a gentle read. Who could not laugh out loud when Morton relayed the exchange of his time at the Devon market day and the pub scene with the old-timer whose dialect he could not understand or his sharing of the resistance to say that Clovelly is quaint. Morton's use of quirky phrases and descriptions of the colorful, eccentric characters he encounters was all wrapped in his subtle (and not so subtle) messages of the loss of the traditional, rural life be it his description of his attempts and chivalry.

Morton could wax poetic especially with the final essay and his discussion of where was England but the enjoyment came from his description of Durham, his prediction that Norwich would either be a lost city in 50 years or considered one of the most beautiful, his statement that you cannot talk to an Englishman as a friend immediately, and his analysis that York was not conscious of its beauty and was too old and too wise and too proud to put itself out as a tourist site.

This reader learned a great deal directly and by researching many of the casual comments such as Morton referring to the relationship between Kaiser Wilhelm and Louis Raemaekers –it was lost on me even though it was dramatically phrased as how one man gave so much harm to another with a pencil. I had to look Raemaekers up. One of the fun things about this book.

One thing to be on the lookout for, is the juxtaposition of the myths of the land with his story telling / realism of journalistic reporting. Morton certainly inspires his readers to jump in the car and drive down a country road and be open to embrace any experience around the corner.

Ben Walker says

An enjoyable journey across England, particularly seeing how little of Chester has changed to the tourist's eye of 1927. We need more of these!
