

INTERNATIONAL PRESS-CUTTING BUREAU
224-236 Waiworth Road,
London SE17 1JE

Extract from

The Guardian - London

19 MAY 1995

Feud that goes the whole frog

Best of Enemies: Anglo-French Relations Since the Norman Conquest

by Robert Gibson

339pp, Sinclair-Stevenson, £25

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A COUPLE of years ago, the results of a survey were published in the British press, suggesting that 2 per cent of English people "admired the French". Reading Professor Gibson's enthralling study, one might conclude that, if it is not a little too high, the figure has remained pretty well constant since the Battle of Hastings, and that it is more or less precisely mirrored on the other side of the Channel. Broadly outlined, the stereotypes are familiar: "they" are lubricious and foppish and cowardly, "we" are barbaric and hypocritical and can't hold our drink.

Details vary, of course. The "untravelling French" of the 12th century were convinced that the English had tails. For the medieval chronicler Froissart, though, the English gentryfolk "are upright and loyal by nature", while "the ordinary people are cruel, perfidious

and disloyal..." The term "*le fair-play*" has been current in the French language since the turn of the century. Yet in the Middle Ages the English won themselves the reputation of a shameful lack of sportsmanship, an unwillingness to accept defeat if fairly beaten, and an insouciance about the rules of war.

These feelings were amplified, and, to an extent, fixed, during the Hundred Years War. When the *Sun* ran its "Hop off you frogs!" headline in 1984, it was tapping into a rich and ancient seam of loathing. Writing in the *Spectator*, Joseph Addison denounced Friar as "a Country which has infected all the Nations of Europe with its Levity". George III was known to wander around Windsor Castle, accosting Eton schoolboys with the words "I hope you hate the French? What?" So ingrained were these habits of mind that one of Victoria's generals in the Crimea customarily referred to the enemy as "the French".

On the other side, patterns of Anglophilia and Francophilia are also telling. In the 1690s, a privileged minority of English fops persisted in aping the manners of their Gallic *compères*, despite the fact that their countries were at war. "Frisking they gaze on every Face they meet/ And dance a Galliard when

they walk the street," sneered one contemporary. The 18th century saw the rise of the French Anglo-maniac, "bundled up in a hideous great cloak", spouting Addison and Pope and trying to pass himself off as a thinker. As far back as you can go, it would seem, an enthusiasm for the culture of the other country has been the mark of a particular kind of upper-class taste.

Cultural exchanges have assumed curious forms. In the 19th century, Walter Scott and Dickens were lionised in Paris; the English reciprocated by setting up the National Vigilance Association, to resist "the pernicious literature of Flaubert, Zola and Maupassant". Yet, as Gibson points out, Verlaine and Rimbaud, Gide and Marc Allegret chose to spend their homosexual honeymoons in England. One can only imagine what Edith Cresson would have to say about *that*.

The overall picture is not so much one of tribal hostility as of sibling rivalry, an uneasy mixture of respect and disdain. Gibson elegantly argues that the two nations should continue to relish their essential differences. "Because of each country's unique merits, it will remain, for the other, the one nation to which it can never feel quite superior." Or ever, quite, admire.