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

Extract from
The Independent - London

27 MAY 1995

Entente not so cordiale

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Robert Gibson's *Best of Enemies* is an engaging account of the long, feuding love affair between England and France. The tempestuous relationship between Marianne, personification of the French nation, and John Bull, her English counterpart, affords a wealth of irresistible ironies and absurdities as well as the odd tender moment.

The figure of John Bull, Gibson tells us, was invented by John Arbuthnot in the early 18th century, at a time rife with both cosmopolitanism and xenophobia. While the wits larked about in Paris, acquiring polish and gloss, stay-at-home defensiveness emphasised all that was bluff and bucolic in the sterling English personality. Arbuthnot designed John Bull as "a character in a set of satirical pamphlets depicting the lawsuit he brings with Nicholas Frog (Holland) against Philip Baboon (the Duke of Anjou) who has bespoken his liveries at the shop of Lewis Baboon (Louis Bourbon, the French king). John Bull is described as an "honest plain-dealing fellow, choleric, bold and of a very inconstant temper . . . very apt to quarrel with his best friends, especially if they pretend to govern him . . . John's temper depended very much upon the air: his spirits rose and fell with the weather-glass. John was quick and understood his business very well . . . a boon companion, loving his bottle and his diversion".

This stereotype has nourished our language ever since. Mrs Gaskell, I'm convinced, drew on it for her creation of Squire Hamley in *Wives and Daughters*, just as in the same novel she brilliantly exploits English anxieties about French sexiness to paint her portrait of

BEST OF ENEMIES:
Anglo-French relations since the Norman conquest
Robert Gibson
Sinclair-Stevenson £25

Cynthia, the enchanting but heartless coquette. Charlotte Brontë, arch-champion of the Duke of Wellington, took prejudice to almost comic extremes: French, while being a language her well-educated heroines speak perfectly, is also French, the epitome of all that is sordid, corrupt, dishonest, oppressive and silly. Robert Gibson, preferring to quote male writers, shows how the tradition was subverted by the French themselves: "Soho long provided sexual displays much more outrageous than the Folies Bergères . . . Verlaine and Rimbaud chose to spend their homosexual honeymoon in London while Gide and Marc Allegret spent theirs in Cambridge." Lesbians (Vita Sackville-West among them) tended to run the other way: Natalie Barney's modernist salon nourished a whole generation of writers; it's only in Paris that Stephen, dyke heroine of *The Well of Loneliness*, can express her true sexuality through the exquisite tailor-made clothes she can buy there. Gibson says dryly: "in the populist English view, Paris remains the capital of sexual licence while 'French kissing' and 'French knickers' continue to enjoy a cachet they may not altogether deserve."

We continue to project our fantasies back and forth. I remember how as a child I was delighted not only to learn that a *crème anglaise* was the French form of custard, but that taking French leave was translated as *filer à l'anglaise*.

One of the additional pleasures of this book is to be found in the telling visual images provided by both sides. Cartoons and sketches pierce the witty, erudite surface of the text to trawl for deeper, more disturbing meanings. A drawing by Paul in *Punch* from September 1986 of "the Chunnel" suggests unconscious anxieties attached to the idea of merging. The gateway to the tunnel is a guillotine, blade hoisted ready to fall on the unsuspecting traveller. Dark washes of ink evoke a dangerous, engulfing landscape that castrates as it kills. On the other side, a French propaganda poster of 1943 labels the English as blood-crazed murderers haunting the scene of their crimes, and shows Joan of Arc, wringing her manacled hands, rising from the flaming pyre of Rouen after an allied air-raid. The female body carries the idea of haunting by both murderers and victims, and it's this compression of meaning which gives the image its force.

Overall, Gibson's study is both fascinating and solidly researched. He tracks the arrival of the Normans, the growth of nationalism in the Middle Ages, the fighting for the domination of western Europe and, later on, the imperial territories, the rise of religious and cultural divisions in the 16th and 17th centuries, the impact of industrial and agricultural progress, the effects of the Revolution and of the Commune, the uneasy truces and lulls of this century. Copious quotation, plus a pleasingly crisp style, combine to make this a very attractive and readable volume. Just the thing to consult en route to the *gîte*.

Michèle Roberts