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Roast beef and frog's legs

It's not just the Channel that has kept France
and England apart, concludes Paul Johnson

THE NON-stop rail service between Waterloo and the Gare du Nord has given a new relish to Anglo-French relations. Avoiding the dreary hassle of two of the world's least congenial airports, the train has made it quite smart for English people to lunch and spend the afternoon in Paris.

Not much sign of the return compliment, however, nor has the Eurotunnel ended mutual awareness of national imperfections. It struck me as odd that on my train all the carriage staff were French and the kitchen staff English, the opposite of what it ought to have been, with the result that the service was rude and the cooking vile. We have a long way to go to make the *entente* efficient, let alone *cordiale*.

All the same, this is a timely moment for a book on Anglo-French attitudes. Robert Gibson is a professor of French, not of history, and his account of our national relations does not always carry conviction. Its merit is that he quotes extensively from the literature of appraisal on both sides of the Channel — at times his book reads like an anthology and is all the more welcome for that.

He makes one important point. French anglophobes tend to be well-educated élitists. Ordinary Frenchmen are not interested in the English or, if they are, tend to admire us. By contrast, English francophobes pride themselves on their ignorance, like Uncle Matthew in *The Pursuit of Love*: "Frogs are slightly better than Huns or Wops, but abroad is unutterably bloody and foreigners are fiends."

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

by Robert Gibson
Sinclair Stevenson, £25

It is significant that "Uncle Matthew's" daughter, Nancy Mitford, who graduated from pearls and twin-sets to intellectual status, became *pari passu* a lifelong francophile, sharing the views of the Bloomsbury groupie in Aldous Huxley's *Crome Yellow*: "She knew that there were very, very few worthwhile things in the world, and that most of them were French."

This important difference has led to a further one. The English tend to go to France from choice and for pleasure; the French come here from necessity. French settlers in England, fleeing religious or political persecution, were much commoner than we suppose. Gibson points out that many an Englishman called King once had ancestors known as Leroi. Lemaitre became Masters, Lenoir Black. Such refugees had no choice but to stay.

Other involuntary exiles, such as Zola or Camille Pisarro, got back to France as soon as they conveniently could. Victor Hugo, who really hated the English for all kinds of historical and cultural reasons, deliberately chose to spend his English exile in the Channel Isles, where they still spoke French in those days.

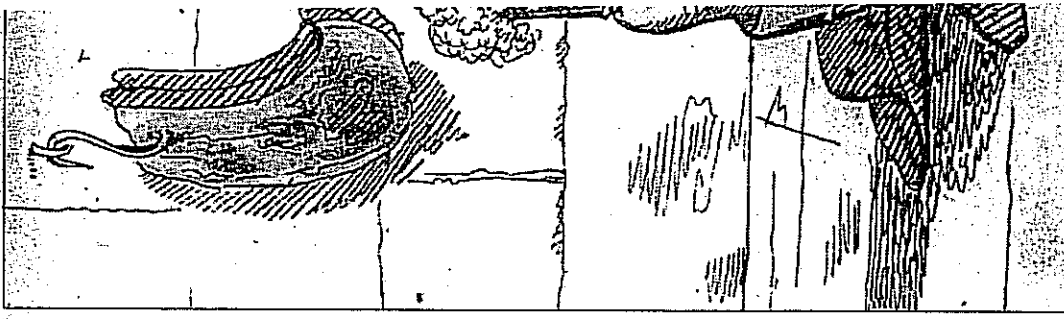
Even today, the French come to England to learn English rather than to enjoy themselves, if they want a

holiday in the British Isles, they much prefer the Scottish Highlands, albeit they find life up there confusing — try asking a French visitor to pronounce "Strathpeffer".

English criticism of the French is encapsulated in James Thomson's line, "The faithless vain disturbers of mankind". "Frogs" lacked religion, they were foppish and they always caused trouble. For generations, the English genuinely feared an occupation by the French, intent on imposing their Utopian politics on us or, more likely, in the guise of revolutionary ardour, out for plunder.

Nor was this view wholly without foundation, at any rate so far as Bonaparte was concerned. He was the only French ruler seriously to plan the conquest of England and his motives varied from glib idealism to contemptuous cupidity. In exile in March 1816, he told Las Cases: "I would not have entered [London] as a conqueror but as a liberator — a new William of Orange, but more generous and disinterested... We would have appeared to them not as victors but as brothers who had come to restore to them their freedom and their rights. I would have told them to form an assembly and to achieve their regeneration through their own efforts... after a few months, these two nations, these ruthless enemies, would have become united in their identical principles, their policies and their interests."

However, a few weeks later he painted a totally different picture: "In my scheme, England was bound



Not quite the *entente*

to become a mere appendix of France. Nature has made her one of our islands, just like Oléron or Corsica."

As British power increased, relative to France, fears of invasion gave way to Puritan terror of Gallic corruption. England had been furtively importing French pornography since at least the 17th century — Pepys confessed with shame he had bought *L'Ecole des filles* — but it was the onset of French mid-19th century which really upset the stiffer element among the English.

The young Swinburne was caught reading a novel by Balzac while staying with the