

BOOKSHELF

JACQUES AND TONY: IT'S AN OLD STORY *Patrick Middleton has been reading a study of Anglo-French relations across a thousand years*

At one point, Robert Gibson, in his *Best of Enemies: Anglo-French Relations Since the Norman Conquest* (UK: Impress Books), encapsulates the entire history in a phrase about "the extremes of adulation and antipathy"

which the British and the French have displayed towards each other. In his earlier pages the antipathy is less apparent. The Middle Ages, it could be said, witnessed a European Union before the fact and those on either side of the Channel at the higher social levels were often of a comparable social and cultural background which gave them a common sense of class. They moved easily between the two countries. The Bishop of Orleans in Joan of Arc's time was a Scot, John Kirkmichael, and this was not so exceptional.

"Irresistible attraction"

The emergence of national consciousness and reciprocal distrust and dislike came with the Hundred Years War. Its effects were deep and enduring. In the nine-toen-thirties the anglophile André Maurois wrote that quite often if he spoke well of the English he came up against "the vague, irritating and persistent memory of the Hundred Years War"; in his heyday Charles de Gaulle would grimly recall that one of his ancestors had charged the English archers at Agincourt. Another determining factor was the English Protestant reformation which established a further cultural gulf between the two peoples. On the other hand, a continuing theme of Gibson's book is the irresistible attraction of one country's way of life for the inhabitants of the other. This has been true, of course, mainly of the higher classes. As the academician Maurice Druon has put it, "The elites tend to admire

one another, and the people to despise one another."

The evidence for this view is there in abundance. On one hand, many of the British were zealous for French art, literature and fashion; numbers of their Gallic contemporaries were fascinated by the technical and other practical achievements of their neighbours. Some enthusiasms were surprising. Albert Cler noted in 1833, of his Paris contemporaries, "Some ladies are having their teeth discoloured to make themselves look like authentic Englishmen." The continuing background to expressions of reciprocal admiration was a routine of abuse. But even in wartime observers on each side saw things to praise in the enemy. And yet whatever ups and downs there have been in the relationship some convictions seem to be very firmly embedded among the two peoples. "The English are the most barbarous people on earth," wrote Stendhal in 1833; "There's always something fishy about the French," warned Noel Coward a century later.

Gibson says his book is intended partly for "British residents in France". Taken straight, it's not an altogether easy read. There's a torrent of quotations which sometimes obscures any general argument. Ideally, this is a bedside book for anyone interested in its subject. On any night you're likely to come upon an odd fact or opinion before dozing off. The very young Napoleon Bonaparte tried to enrol at Portsmouth Naval College; De Gaulle had an Irish grandmother; Giscard found it "totally impossible" to find a non-work topic of common interest when hosting Margaret Thatcher. ■

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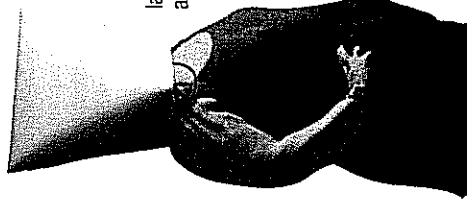


BUT THEY DO GET FAT!

Remember Mireille Guiliano? She's the slim and elegant French businesswoman, currently heading up *Veuve Clicquot* in the U.S., who recently wrote a book with the challenging title *French Women Don't Get Fat*. Guiliano has chosen not to have her book, currently only available in English, published in French. Maybe she believes her stay-at-home sisters don't need it. Meanwhile it's selling very well across the Atlantic.

But maybe the hefty ladies in L.A. and New York and in the fly-over states between are being misled. Top French nutritionist Dr France Bellisle has come forward to naysay Guiliano's claim. "I can tell you that French women are getting obese – and some massively obese – these days. It's a major public health problem." To back this up she points to the figures. Some 11 per cent of the French are now clinically obese. Okay, that's less than in the U.S. but the number of fatties is growing by the month and women are putting on the pounds faster than the men.

So why are the French, and especially the women, losing their legendary leanness? Another nutritionist, Dr Gerard Kriegel, has no doubt: "People have switched from healthy food to rubbish. In many homes a typical dinner table has Coke, *frites*, ketchup and a frozen pizza as its main features. Eating out means places like KFC which is enjoying a boom in France at the moment. There's nothing wrong with fast food occasionally but it's bad to pig out on burgers and fries, as some do, every other day. If this goes on our mothers, wives and daughters will become indistinguishable from those waddling American ladies we've laughed at for so long." **J.P.-B.**



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