

## **Irish and other Interviewers**

It is often asked what should be the first thing that a man sees when he lands in a foreign country; but I think it should be the vision of his own country. At least when I came into New York Harbour, a sort of grey and green cloud came between me and the towers with multitudinous windows, white in the winter sunlight; and I saw an old brown house standing back among the beech-trees at home, the house of only one among many friends and neighbours, but one somehow so sunken in the very heart of England as to be unconscious of her imperial or international position, and out of the sound of her perilous seas. But what made most clear the vision that revisited me was something else. Before we touched land the men of my own guild, the journalists and reporters, had already boarded the ship like pirates. And one of them spoke to me in an accent that I knew; and thanked me for all I had done for Ireland. And it was at that moment that I knew most vividly that what I wanted was to do something for England.

Then, as it chanced, I looked across at the statue of Liberty, and saw that the great bronze was gleaming green in the morning light. I had made all the obvious jokes about the statue of Liberty. I found it had a soothing effect on earnest Prohibitionists on the boat to urge, as a point of dignity and delicacy, that it ought to be given back to the French, a vicious race abandoned to the culture of the vine. I proposed that the last liquors on board should be poured out in a pagan libation before it. And then I suddenly remembered that this Liberty was still in some sense enlightening the world, or one part of the world; was a lamp for one sort of wanderer, a star of one sort of seafarer. To one persecuted people at least this land had really been an asylum; even if recent legislation (as I have said) had made them think it a lunatic asylum. They had made it so much their home that the very colour of the country seemed to change with the infusion; as the bronze of the great statue took on a semblance of the wearing of the green.

It is a commonplace that the Englishman has been stupid in his relations with the Irish; but he has been far more stupid in his relations with the Americans on the subject of the Irish. His propaganda has been worse than his practice; and his defence more ill-considered than the most indefensible things that it was intended to defend. There is in this matter a curious tangle of cross-purposes, which only a parallel example can make at all clear. And I will note the point here, because it is some testimony to its vivid importance that it was really the first I had to discuss on American soil with an American citizen. In a double sense I touched Ireland before I came to America. I will take an imaginary instance from another controversy; in order to show how the apology can be worse than the action. The best we can say for ourselves is worse than the worst

that we can do.

There was a time when English poets and other publicists could always be inspired with instantaneous indignation about the persecuted Jews in Russia. We have heard less about them since we heard more about the persecuting Jews in Russia. I fear there are a great many middle-class Englishmen already who wish that Trotsky had been persecuted a little more. But even in those days Englishmen divided their minds in a curious fashion; and unconsciously distinguished between the Jews whom they had never seen, in Warsaw, and the Jews whom they had often seen in Whitechapel. It seemed to be assumed that, by a curious coincidence, Russia possessed not only the very worst Anti-Semites but the very best Semites. A moneylender in London might be like Judas Iscariot; but a moneylender in Moscow must be like Judas Maccabaeus.

Nevertheless there remained in our common sense an unconscious but fundamental comprehension of the unity of Israel; a sense that some things could be said, and some could not be said, about the Jews as a whole. Suppose that even in those days, to say nothing of these, an English protest against Russian Anti-Semitism had been answered by the Russian Anti-Semites, and suppose the answer had been somewhat as follows:--

'It is all very well for foreigners to complain of our denying civic rights to our Jewish subjects; but we know the Jews better than they do. They are a barbarous people, entirely primitive, and very like the simple savages who cannot count beyond five on their fingers. It is quite impossible to make them understand ordinary numbers, to say nothing of simple economics. They do not realise the meaning or the value of money. No Jew anywhere in the world can get into his stupid head the notion of a bargain, or of exchanging one thing for another. Their hopeless incapacity for commerce or finance would retard the progress of our people, would prevent the spread of any sort of economic education, would keep the whole country on a level lower than that of the most prehistoric methods of barter. What Russia needs most is a mercantile middle class; and it is unjust to ask us to swamp its small beginnings in thousands of these rude tribesmen, who cannot do a sum of simple addition, or understand the symbolic character of a threepenny bit. We might as well be asked to give civic rights to cows and pigs as to this unhappy, half-witted race who can no more count than the beasts of the field. In every intellectual exercise they are hopelessly incompetent; no Jew can play chess; no Jew can learn languages; no Jew has ever appeared in the smallest part in any theatrical performance; no Jew can give or take any pleasure connected with any musical instrument. These people are our subjects; and we understand them. We accept full responsibility for treating such troglodytes on our own terms.'

It would not be entirely convincing. It would sound a little far-fetched and unreal. But it would sound exactly like our utterances about the Irish, as they sound to all Americans, and rather especially to Anti-Irish Americans. That is exactly the impression we produce on the people of the United States when we say, as we do say in substance, something like this: 'We mean no harm to the poor dear Irish, so dreamy, so irresponsible, so incapable of order or organisation. If we were to withdraw from their country they would only fight among themselves; they have no notion of how to rule themselves. There is something charming about their unpracticability, about their very incapacity for the coarse business of politics. But for their own sakes it is impossible to leave these emotional visionaries to ruin themselves in the attempt to rule themselves. They are like children; but they are our own children, and we understand them. We accept full responsibility for acting as their parents and guardians.'

Now the point is not only that this view of the Irish is false, but that it is the particular view that the Americans know to be false. While we are saying that the Irish could not organise, the Americans are complaining, often very bitterly, of the power of Irish organisation. While we say that the Irishman could not rule himself, the Americans are saying, more or less humorously, that the Irishman rules them. A highly intelligent professor said to me in Boston, 'We have solved the Irish problem here; we have an entirely independent Irish Government.' While we are complaining, in an almost passionate manner, of the impotence of mere cliques of idealists and dreamers, they are complaining, often in a very indignant manner, of the power of great gangs of bosses and bullies. There are a great many Americans who pity the Irish, very naturally and very rightly, for the historic martyrdom which their patriotism has endured. But there are a great many Americans who do not pity the Irish in the least. They would be much more likely to pity the English; only this particular way of talking tends rather to make them despise the English. Thus both the friends of Ireland and the foes of Ireland tend to be the foes of England. We make one set of enemies by our action, and another by our apology.

It is a thing that can from time to time be found in history; a misunderstanding that really has a moral. The English excuse would carry much more weight if it had more sincerity and more humility. There are a considerable number of people in the United States who could sympathise with us, if we would say frankly that we fear the Irish. Those who thus despise our pity might possibly even respect our fear. The argument I have often used in other places comes back with prodigious and redoubled force, after hearing anything of American opinion; the argument that the only reasonable or reputable excuse for the English is the excuse of a patriotic sense of peril; and that the Unionist, if he must be a Unionist, should use that and no other. When the Unionist has said that he dare not let loose against himself a captive he has so cruelly wronged, he has said all

that he has to say; all that he has ever had to say; all that he will ever have to say. He is like a man who has sent a virile and rather vindictive rival unjustly to penal servitude; and who connives at the continuance of the sentence, not because he himself is particularly vindictive, but because he is afraid of what the convict will do when he comes out of prison. This is not exactly a moral strength, but it is a very human weakness; and that is the most that can be said for it. All other talk, about Celtic frenzy or Catholic superstition, is cant invented to deceive himself or to deceive the world. But the vital point to realise is that it is cant that cannot possibly deceive the American world. In the matter of the Irishman the American is not to be deceived. It is not merely true to say that he knows better. It is equally true to say that he knows worse. He knows vices and evils in the Irishman that are entirely hidden in the hazy vision of the Englishman. He knows that our unreal slanders are inconsistent even with the real sins. To us Ireland is a shadowy Isle of Sunset, like Atlantis, about which we can make up legends. To him it is a positive ward or parish in the heart of his huge cities, like Whitechapel; about which even we cannot make legends but only lies. And, as I have said, there are some lies we do not tell even about Whitechapel. We do not say it is inhabited by Jews too stupid to count or know the value of a coin.

The first thing for any honest Englishman to send across the sea is this; that the English have not the shadow of a notion of what they are up against in America. They have never even heard of the batteries of almost brutal energy, of which I had thus touched a live wire even before I landed. People talk about the hypocrisy of England in dealing with a small nationality. What strikes me is the stupidity of England in supposing that she is dealing with a small nationality; when she is really dealing with a very large nationality. She is dealing with a nationality that often threatens, even numerically, to dominate all the other nationalities of the United States. The Irish are not decaying; they are not unpractical; they are scarcely even scattered; they are not even poor. They are the most powerful and practical world-combination with whom we can decide to be friends or foes; and that is why I thought first of that still and solid brown house in Buckinghamshire, standing back in the shadow of the trees.

Among my impressions of America I have deliberately put first the figure of the Irish-American interviewer, standing on the shore more symbolic than the statue of Liberty. The Irish interviewer's importance for the English lay in the fact of his being an Irishman, but there was also considerable interest in the circumstance of his being an interviewer. And as certain wild birds sometimes wing their way far out to sea and are the first signal of the shore, so the first Americans the traveller meets are often American interviewers; and they are generally birds of a feather, and they certainly flock together. In this respect, there is a slight difference in the etiquette of the craft in the two countries, which I was delighted to discuss with my fellow craftsmen. If I could at that moment have flown back to

Fleet Street I am happy to reflect that nobody in the world would in the least wish to interview me. I should attract no more attention than the stone griffin opposite the Law Courts; both monsters being grotesque but also familiar. But supposing for the sake of argument that anybody did want to interview me, it is fairly certain that the fact of one paper publishing such an interview would rather prevent the other papers from doing so. The repetition of the same views of the same individual in two places would be considered rather bad journalism; it would have an air of stolen thunder, not to say stage thunder.

But in America the fact of my landing and lecturing was evidently regarded in the same light as a murder or a great fire, or any other terrible but incurable catastrophe, a matter of interest to all pressmen concerned with practical events. One of the first questions I was asked was how I should be disposed to explain the wave of crime in New York. Naturally I replied that it might possibly be due to the number of English lecturers who had recently landed. In the mood of the moment it seemed possible that, if they had all been interviewed, regrettable incidents might possibly have taken place. But this was only the mood of the moment, and even as a mood did not last more than a moment. And since it has reference to a rather common and a rather unjust conception of American journalism, I think it well to take it first as a fallacy to be refuted, though the refutation may require a rather longer approach.

I have generally found that the traveller fails to understand a foreign country, through treating it as a tendency and not as a balance. But if a thing were always tending in one direction it would soon tend to destruction. Everything that merely progresses finally perishes. Every nation, like every family, exists upon a compromise, and commonly a rather eccentric compromise; using the word 'eccentric' in the sense of something that is somehow at once crazy and healthy. Now the foreigner commonly sees some feature that he thinks fantastic without seeing the feature that balances it. The ordinary examples are obvious enough. An Englishman dining inside a hotel on the boulevards thinks the French eccentric in refusing to open a window. But he does not think the English eccentric in refusing to carry their chairs and tables out on to the pavement in Ludgate Circus. An Englishman will go poking about in little Swiss or Italian villages, in wild mountains or in remote islands, demanding tea; and never reflects that he is like a Chinaman who should enter all the wayside public-houses in Kent and Sussex and demand opium. But the point is not merely that he demands what he cannot expect to enjoy; it is that he ignores even what he does enjoy. He does not realise the sublime and starry paradox of the phrase, *vin ordinaire*, which to him should be a glorious jest like the phrase 'common gold' or 'daily diamonds.' These are the simple and self-evident cases; but there are many more subtle cases of the same thing; of the tendency to see that the nation fills up its own gap with its own substitute; or corrects its own extravagance with its

own precaution. The national antidote generally grows wild in the woods side by side with the national poison. If it did not, all the natives would be dead. For it is so, as I have said, that nations necessarily die of the undiluted poison called progress.

It is so in this much-abused and over-abused example of the American journalist. The American interviewers really have exceedingly good manners for the purposes of their trade, granted that it is necessary to pursue their trade. And even what is called their hustling method can truly be said to cut both ways, or hustle both ways; for if they hustle in, they also hustle out. It may not at first sight seem the very warmest compliment to a gentleman to congratulate him on the fact that he soon goes away. But it really is a tribute to his perfection in a very delicate social art; and I am quite serious when I say that in this respect the interviewers are artists. It might be more difficult for an Englishman to come to the point, particularly the sort of point which American journalists are supposed, with some exaggeration, to aim at. It might be more difficult for an Englishman to ask a total stranger on the spur of the moment for the exact inscription on his mother's grave; but I really think that if an Englishman once got so far as that he would go very much farther, and certainly go on very much longer. The Englishman would approach the churchyard by a rather more wandering woodland path; but if once he had got to the grave I think he would have much more disposition, so to speak, to sit down on it. Our own national temperament would find it decidedly more difficult to disconnect when connections had really been established. Possibly that is the reason why our national temperament does not establish them. I suspect that the real reason that an Englishman does not talk is that he cannot leave off talking. I suspect that my solitary countrymen, hiding in separate railway compartments, are not so much retiring as a race of Trappists as escaping from a race of talkers.

However this may be, there is obviously something of practical advantage in the ease with which the American butterfly flits from flower to flower. He may in a sense force his acquaintance on us, but he does not force himself on us. Even when, to our prejudices, he seems to insist on knowing us, at least he does not insist on our knowing him. It may be, to some sensibilities, a bad thing that a total stranger should talk as if he were a friend, but it might possibly be worse if he insisted on being a friend before he would talk like one. To a great deal of the interviewing, indeed much the greater part of it, even this criticism does not apply; there is nothing which even an Englishman of extreme sensibility could regard as particularly private; the questions involved are generally entirely public, and treated with not a little public spirit. But my only reason for saying here what can be said even for the worst exceptions is to point out this general and neglected principle; that the very thing that we complain of in a foreigner generally carries with it its own foreign cure. American interviewing is generally

very reasonable, and it is always very rapid. And even those to whom talking to an intelligent fellow creature is as horrible as having a tooth out may still admit that American interviewing has many of the qualities of American dentistry.

Another effect that has given rise to this fallacy, this exaggeration of the vulgarity and curiosity of the press, is the distinction between the articles and the headlines; or rather the tendency to ignore that distinction. The few really untrue and unscrupulous things I have seen in American 'stories' have always been in the headlines. And the headlines are written by somebody else; some solitary and savage cynic locked up in the office, hating all mankind, and raging and revenging himself at random, while the neat, polite, and rational pressman can safely be let loose to wander about the town.

For instance, I talked to two decidedly thoughtful fellow journalists immediately on my arrival at a town in which there had been some labour troubles. I told them my general view of Labour in the very largest and perhaps the vaguest historical outline; pointing out that the one great truth to be taught to the middle classes was that Capitalism was itself a crisis, and a passing crisis; that it was not so much that it was breaking down as that it had never really stood up. Slaveries could last, and peasantries could last; but wage-earning communities could hardly even live, and were already dying.

All this moral and even metaphysical generalisation was most fairly and most faithfully reproduced by the interviewer, who had actually heard it casually and idly spoken. But on the top of this column of political philosophy was the extraordinary announcement in enormous letters, 'Chesterton Takes Sides in Trolley Strike.' This was inaccurate. When I spoke I not only did not know that there was any trolley strike, but I did not know what a trolley strike was. I should have had an indistinct idea that a large number of citizens earned their living by carrying things about in wheel-barrows, and that they had desisted from the beneficent activities. Any one who did not happen to be a journalist, or know a little about journalism, American and English, would have supposed that the same man who wrote the article had suddenly gone mad and written the title. But I know that we have here to deal with two different types of journalists; and the man who writes the headlines I will not dare to describe; for I have not seen him except in dreams.

Another innocent complication is that the interviewer does sometimes translate things into his native language. It would not seem odd that a French interviewer should translate them into French; and it is certain that the American interviewer sometimes translates them into American. Those who imagine the two languages to be the same are more innocent than any interviewer. To take one out of the twenty examples, some of which I have mentioned elsewhere, suppose an

interviewer had said that I had the reputation of being a nut. I should be flattered but faintly surprised at such a tribute to my dress and dashing exterior. I should afterwards be sobered and enlightened by discovering that in America a nut does not mean a dandy but a defective or imbecile person. And as I have here to translate their American phrase into English, it may be very defensible that they should translate my English phrases into American. Anyhow they often do translate them into American. In answer to the usual question about Prohibition I had made the usual answer, obvious to the point of dullness to those who are in daily contact with it, that it is a law that the rich make knowing they can always break it. From the printed interview it appeared that I had said, 'Prohibition! All matter of dollar sign.' This is almost avowed translation, like a French translation. Nobody can suppose that it would come natural to an Englishman to talk about a dollar, still less about a dollar sign--whatever that may be. It is exactly as if he had made me talk about the Skelt and Stevenson Toy Theatre as 'a cent plain, and two cents coloured' or condemned a parsimonious policy as dime-wise and dollar-foolish. Another interviewer once asked me who was the greatest American writer. I have forgotten exactly what I said, but after mentioning several names, I said that the greatest natural genius and artistic force was probably Walt Whitman. The printed interview is more precise; and students of my literary and conversational style will be interested to know that I said, 'See here, Walt Whitman was your one real red-blooded man.' Here again I hardly think the translation can have been quite unconscious; most of my intimates are indeed aware that I do not talk like that, but I fancy that the same fact would have dawned on the journalist to whom I had been talking. And even this trivial point carries with it the two truths which must be, I fear, the rather monotonous moral of these pages. The first is that America and England can be far better friends when sharply divided than when shapelessly amalgamated. These two journalists were false reporters, but they were true translators. They were not so much interviewers as interpreters. And the second is that in any such difference it is often wholesome to look beneath the surface for a superiority. For ability to translate does imply ability to understand; and many of these journalists really did understand. I think there are many English journalists who would be more puzzled by so simple an idea as the plutocratic foundation of Prohibition. But the American knew at once that I meant it was a matter of dollar sign; probably because he knew very well that it is.

Then again there is a curious convention by which American interviewing makes itself out much worse than it is. The reports are far more rowdy and insolent than the conversations. This is probably a part of the fact that a certain vivacity, which to some seems vitality and to some vulgarity, is not only an ambition but an ideal. It must always be grasped that this vulgarity is an ideal even more than it is a reality. It is an ideal when it is not a reality. A very quiet and intelligent young man, in a soft black hat and tortoise-shell spectacles, will ask for an interview



with unimpeachable politeness, wait for his living subject with unimpeachable patience, talk to him quite sensibly for twenty minutes, and go noiselessly away. Then in the newspaper next morning you will read how he beat the bedroom door in, and pursued his victim on to the roof or dragged him from under the bed, and tore from him replies to all sorts of bald and ruthless questions printed in large black letters. I was often interviewed in the evening, and had no notion of how atrociously I had been insulted till I saw it in the paper next morning. I had no notion I had been on the rack of an inquisitor until I saw it in plain print; and then of course I believed it, with a faith and docility unknown in any previous epoch of history. An interesting essay might be written upon points upon which nations affect more vices than they possess; and it might deal more fully with the American pressman, who is a harmless clubman in private, and becomes a sort of highway-robber in print.

I have turned this chapter into something like a defence of interviewers, because I really think they are made to bear too much of the burden of the bad developments of modern journalism. But I am very far from meaning to suggest that those bad developments are not very bad. So far from wishing to minimise the evil, I would in a real sense rather magnify it. I would suggest that the evil itself is a much larger and more fundamental thing; and that to deal with it by abusing poor journalists, doing their particular and perhaps peculiar duty, is like dealing with a pestilence by rubbing at one of the spots. What is wrong with the modern world will not be righted by attributing the whole disease to each of its symptoms in turn; first to the tavern and then to the cinema and then to the reporter's room. The evil of journalism is not in the journalists. It is not in the poor men on the lower level of the profession, but in the rich men at the top of the profession; or rather in the rich men who are too much on top of the profession even to belong to it. The trouble with newspapers is the Newspaper Trust, as the trouble might be with a Wheat Trust, without involving a vilification of all the people who grow wheat. It is the American plutocracy and not the American press. What is the matter with the modern world is not modern headlines or modern films or modern machinery. What is the matter with the modern world is the modern world; and the cure will come from another.