

A Peculiarly British View of the British Abroad: an enduring tradition of comic success and tragic failure¹

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Introduction

This paper is the first part of a larger joint project which aims to look at portraits of the British abroad in *Punch Magazine* and *The Spectator* between 1850 and 1939. As an initial study, this paper will begin with a general look at the popular conceptions of the figure of the British tourist and then focus on the particular representation of the British tourist abroad as depicted in one time *Punch* editor, F.C. Burnand's, fictional portrait of the 'Boompje Club' in his 1890 publication *Very Much Abroad*.

As Paul Fussell has pointed out in his definitive study of British 'literary traveling' between the two world wars, drawing the lines between the *explorer*, the *traveller*, and the *tourist* is a notoriously 'slippery' task:

'All three make journeys, but the explorer seeks the undiscovered, the traveller that which has been discovered by the mind working in history, the tourist that which has been discovered by entrepreneurship and prepared for him by the arts of mass publicity.' (Fussell, 39)

The implications of this statement underline the inherent position of superiority a true *traveller* imagines he holds over a mere *tourist*. To discuss the validity of this hierarchical framework is another paper entirely, but it is important here to emphasise that the traveller/tourist dichotomy is ancient. The tourist is not a modern invention, as many self-professed travellers like to believe, he has always closely followed in the

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footsteps of explorers and travellers both: the journey to Jerusalem for early Christian pilgrims, for example, soon became more of a touristic experience than a devotional one.

Arguably, the swarms of young aristocratic British (mostly) men on the Continent indulging in their extended educational journeys through Europe in the 17th and 18th provided the prototype for today's modern tourist. The Grand Tour was always an ideological exercise for the upper classes: the elite of British society were herded along a prescribed route which took in all the 'must-see' sights of Europe. They were attended by guides and their often incompetent tutors or 'bearleaders' – a name which hints at the wild behaviour of their charges. In most cases, the experience was never quite as ennobling as intended and only served to re-enforce the old preconceptions and prejudices about national characteristics.

Although not a 'young bear' himself, Tobias Smollett, in his ironic narrative, 'Travels through France and Italy' (1766), famously gives voice to the profound contempt for foreigners that many British aristocrats shared:

Of all the people I have ever seen, the hostlers, postilions, and other fellows hanging about the post-houses in Italy, are the most greedy, impertinent, and provoking. Happy are those travellers who have phlegm enough to disregard their insolence and importunity: for this is not so disagreeable as their revenge is dangerous. (Smollett, From Letter XCVII; London, May 15, 1749)

During the Napoleonic wars, travel for pleasure between Britain and the Continent was impossible, but with the victory at Waterloo and the rise of the railways, the Grand Tour custom continued, but it was of a qualitative difference: cheaper to undertake, safer, easier, and therefore faster, and most importantly open to anyone.² From the outset the new paradigm of travel – that of Mass Tourism, was held in contempt by people who saw themselves as independent travellers, and thus superior by reason of intellect, education, curiosity and spirit. The contempt of the travelling

² Lord Byron complained in 1815 that Rome was 'pestilent with English'.

aristocrat for the foreigner was now partly transferred to the new, inevitably lower, class of tourist who, with the help of Cook & Sons was bent upon flaunting his new found wealth and having his share of the freedom associated with the Grand Tour.

According to Fussell, the period comprising the 19th and early 20th century was the 'heyday' of travel and travel writing; it was also the heyday of the British Empire. During this period the British tourist abroad is more than ever before represented in the Press as a figure of fun; full of comically odious foibles and tragically unaware of his general ignorance. Nowhere is this more evident than in F.C. Burnand's *Very Much Abroad*, a collection of six humorous, fictional short stories, the longest of which is 'The Boompje Papers'. The characters, or caricatures, that make up the Boompje Club are members of the upper-class and the insider joke here is that they, despite their superior birth and professed credentials as authentic travellers of the adventurous kind, display many of the attitudes that are deemed reprehensible in the tourist.

'The Boompje Papers'

'The Boompje Papers' is the product of diary annotations made by the narrator - the secretary of the Boompje club, during a sight-seeing trip between London and Rotterdam. Burnand's purpose is to light-heartedly depict the continental comings and goings of a small group of upper class men as they desperately attempt to while away their spare time through edifying continental travel. All aspects of their journey are lampooned through in-jokes concerning the stereotypical British Abroad, the objective being no more than to entertain the knowledgeable reader.

In order to successfully achieve his comic aim, Burnand shows how the typical British tourist of the 1890s fails to really get to know the countries visited or learn very much about their cultures. The pre-conceived ideas, lack of independent thought and

determination to 'play the part', mixed with earnest, affable naivety and an almost childlike desire to 'get it right' are packed into the suitcases with the changes of clothing and dragged from place to place. Never being relinquished, the possibility of any 'broadening of the mind' is precluded, as shown by a series of comic situations.

The story is narrated by the secretary of the club who recalls that the name Boompje (pronounced Boomp - je) was coined by one of the travellers as he looked out of his Rotterdam hotel window:

"Do you know where we are?" There was a pause, and he continued, "We are on the Boompje"

Thereupon, somebody said, "Let us be Boompjes", and somebody else said, "Let's," and the motion was carried. (Burnand, 2)

The narrator confirms the veracity of the place name by referring to two references in the 'infallible *Murray*' 'This was enough' he says. In other words, Burnand introduces the reader at the very beginning of his narrative to the traveller's best friend, the *Murray* guide book, and shares a wry smile with the reader concerning the tourists' absolute faith in this modern 'Bible'.³ One member of the party, Gooch, does not condone the use of anything as 'touristy' and 'English', as the *Murray*, however (13).

The club motto is 'Dam N° 2' (seen on the address plaque of an Amsterdam house, exemplifying the Boompje principle to take care of Number One, and let number two look out for himself. (72)

There are a number of Boompje Principles such as:

To say at ten A.M. "I'm off!" and to *be* off to Anywhere (America, for example), before eleven'. (2)

The reader is further informed that 'Boompje' may be uttered to qualify any quirky or spontaneous action. It is 'bounce'. (60) In short, the narrator advised using the word 'on *every* possible occasion' for it would be suitable and appropriate.

³ Later, Dort is rejected as a stop because *Murray* says "There is nothing to detain the traveller at Dort" (Burnand: 9)

The travel party was composed of the 'enthusiastic musician' and nominated leader, 'The Commodore' Bund; the badly-dressed but eminent artist Maullie; the anonymous narrator/Secretary; Dickie ('The Count') Gooch, food-lover and paradigm of upper-class breeding and reserve who was frequently embarrassed by the antics of the party; and the hopelessly incompetent Swiss guide Jomp, who among other things carried Bund's carpetbag containing the guidebooks *Murray* and *Bradshaw* everywhere.⁴

The trip would be of ten days duration only, for the London season was beginning and the parties, balls, concerts, teas, drums etc. could not be missed at any cost. The narrator confides that Gooch, after all, had only one invitation for a private operatic performance at the home of someone he did not know - 'But a genuine Boompje of London Society would rather die than own such a melancholy fact.' Burnand pokes fun at the earnest desire to be a part of the frivolity of upper-class life. (22 & 5)

'Dutchland' was the destination, via France and Belgium. Whilst the financial arrangements were sidelined as 'mere detail', it was decided after discussion to hire a guide ('courier') as no-one spoke Dutch, and although the secretary thought that French 'would do', this was eventually rejected. Maullie yielded to the hiring of a guide on condition he could map out 'what they *ought* to see.' The italicized 'ought' draws attention to the fact that spontaneity and genuine exploration would be subsidiary to the received opinions and ideas of supposed experts.

The reasons for choosing Holland were:

Bund goes because he's seen the picture galleries once, and forgotten all about them.

Maullie, because he knows all the pictures by heart, but has never seen them.

⁴ (*ibid*: 22). Jomp is said to be proficient in many languages to the point of being unintelligible in any particular tongue.

Gooch, because he has never heard of or seen the pictures.
The Secretary, because he has never seen the pictures, but heard of them vaguely.
The Courier, because he's taken. (7)

The well-dressed Gooch, always anxious to keep up appearances, has an erroneous belief in his ability to speak understandable French, and shows various facets of the stereotypical British tourist. Although he regards himself as well-travelled, he wrongly identifies two people on the boat crossing the channel as 'regular foreigners'. They were commercial travellers from Liverpool! 'Boompje' says Burnand - in other words he got it wrong and knows much less about 'foreigners' than he thinks. His comments and subsequent joy at being in 'La belle France!' where he implies he had been born or brought up, reveals recognition of the difference in customs and an ability to appreciate 'the other'. However, on a practical level, his insistence on speaking French even if the sentences are finished with a shrug and a look and are not understood, belays his poor command of anything other than his native tongue and provides Burnand with ample material for making the reader smirk.

Maullie on the other hand is stereotyped through his outward appearance and his public behaviour. Gooch bemoans Maullie's loud travel attire, although he excuses him because he is an artist: The English tourist is 'complete in light check coat, check trousers, white waistcoat, white wideawake [hat], with *Bradshaw*, sketchbook and pencil.' He wishes to confine Maullie's hat and *Bradshaw* to the flames so as not to be mixed up with these 'travelling English everywhere'. The desire not to be associated with the common tourist shows Burnand differentiating between types of traveller, revealing that class snobbery persisted even, and especially, when abroad.

Maullie irritates Gooch by continuously stopping in the street to sketch something of interest, mainly because he thus attracts attention. The 'ridiculous' hat, Bund's ever present carpetbag and the artistic pose lead passers-by to think a

performance or conjuring trick is imminent. (This reinforces the idea of travel as a pantomime/performance). Gooch declares that neither Maullie himself nor foreigners would do the same when in London and so censors the desire to learn from the foreign experience by advocating a code of conduct appropriate to home. Appearances are paramount. (2)

Regarding food, Gooch is surprisingly the one who valiantly attempts to conform to the host country's customs, but as usual he is confounded. In Ghent, he enquires as to the menu (in French) but is offered roast beef, mutton and plum pudding. "What's the good of coming abroad for *that*?" he expostulates. Insisting on a full menu, he only succeeds with the *hors d'oeuvre* (radishes on one plate and butter on the other), the remainder being served in the English style. Jomp is accused of having betrayed them as being English and therefore liking roast beef, mutton and plum pudding, which he denies. This food scenario is repeated throughout the narrative. The joke is that despite efforts to the contrary, the English cannot escape their reputation and despite their best efforts they find it impossible to experience fully a foreign cuisine.

In Ghent, efforts to see the sites prove fruitless; the hopeless courier being the butt of the joke. He confuses the two sites, which are closed anyway. The effort made to see foreign places of interest, even when of dubious quality, is made fun of, although the blame for the failure is laid at the courier's door, and not the party members'. The travellers are trying to fulfil their function, however much effort it takes (15) However, the sightseeing problems are aggravated in Rotterdam. Bund's objective was to see the statue of Erasmus and some pictures. The courier has only passed through the city once, and thus proves useless once again. *Murray* reveals one day only is needed to see all that is remarkable in Rotterdam. "Is there nothing to see!" says Gooch, "See? Yes!" replies Mullie enthusiastically 'I could spend weeks here. Isn't there a tower or

something to go up and get a view from?" Gooch replies that he could have stopped in London and 'gone up the Monument' to do that and 'to go up towers and belfries is "such a regular British tourist sort of thing."(24) The desire not to be associated with the ordinary Briton abroad gets in the way of enjoying what Rotterdam has to offer - a very different view from that of London's Monument. Maullie, on the other hand, is unfettered by notions of propriety and gains a 'fresh lease of life' from climbing stairs in foreign countries to obtain a splendid view. They eventually climb the steps and experience the view, but compromise by going immediately afterwards to the restaurant for "*dejeuner à la fourchette*".

An amusing scene in a gallery in the Hague shows the utter ignorance, not to say stupidity, of the upper-class British tourist. Maullie has led the way in genuine appreciation of the pictures on display, especially Rembrandt's *Lecture on Anatomy*. The rest of the party relies on the guide book or intuitive guesswork for any coherent comment. Upon meeting two London friends (Muntley and Finton, 'not in tourist suits'), Gooch introduces Maullie, R.A. by emphasizing his artistic renown, thereby causing his bad dress sense to be overlooked. Muntley prides himself on his conversation and knowledge of art but confounds Maullie by saying there are few good paintings to see, the catalogue having deceived them. The reason for this observation is that he does not recognise the non-anglicized spellings of the names:

"they pretend they've got Rubens's pictures here, but they spell it 'Rubbens,' so as to do you. Look here: '122. *Venus et Adonis dans un Paysage*'" This he reads with a real British accent, adding his translation, "*Venus and Adonis in a Passage*, by Rubbens. It won't do you know". (33)

The joke is on the ignorant, righteous British tourists who believe there has been an unsuccessful attempt to fool them. Only the furious Maullie is capable of correcting them, an act he refrains from doing, preferring to continue his independent appreciation

of the many Great Masters in the gallery. It is only possible to smile here if one has a rudimentary knowledge of French (*paysage* /passage) and of the great Dutch painters i.e. if one can count oneself as a Maullie and not as a Muntley. Ecstatic but non-comprehending behaviour before well-known works of art is ridiculed, as well as reliance on received opinion to camouflage ignorance.

Misunderstandings caused by failures in communication are used particularly successfully as a humorous device. Gooch's insistence on speaking French even when his listener is unable to understand him has been mentioned. Language problems are explored particularly between the courier and the Dutch. Jomp's Swiss-French is unintelligible to the 'Hollanders' the explanation being that they 'come from somewhere else'. Jomp's Boompje theory is that there is a part of Holland where a number of the natives neither understand nor speak their own language. The current notoriously deficient language skills of the English were evident in the 1890s, even though learning French was a compulsory part of high brow education.

Burnand furnishes the reader with very little description of the foreign landscape. An exception to this is details of a fish market in Schevening (46) which Maullie tries to draw. Also, the Pleasure Gardens of Broek near Amsterdam are amply described as their dilapidated state belied the rapturous description given in *Murray*. Maullie says:

"Gentlemen, [...] we have come all the way from England to Holland, have endured much, and have travelled night and day in order to see a broken weather-cock in the shape of a diminutive mermaid!" [...] *Advice to those about to visit Broek - DON'T!* (79)

Conclusion:

In conclusion, the 'Boompje Papers' are a delightful example of the comic success of the risible figure of the Tourist in the British Press, where the caricatures were as much informed by the inherent snobbery of the British upper class concerning

mass tourism as by the antics and attitudes of the tourists themselves. At a time in British history when it was felt that the success of imperial conquests confirmed British superiority in Europe and indeed the world, the members of the Boompje Club unwittingly reveal the prejudices and ignorance of their kind. The last laugh in this humorous portrait of the British abroad, directed at F.C. Burnand's knowing readership, was not in fact at the expense of one social group singled out for ridicule, but on us all; ultimately, however hard we may try to distance ourselves from the mob, we are all just hapless tourists. Burnand shows the difficulties we have in approaching the foreign with confidence and in finding the authority to say something that makes sense of it.

The comic success in print of the British tourist abroad during this period was matched only by his tragic failure to live out the original dream of Thomas Cook, who believed that travel in the form of mass tourism would lead to all manner of positive transformations in British society, including:

'...the breaking down of partition walls of prejudice, the subduing of evil passions and unhappy tempers, the expansion of the intellect, the grasping for information, the desire for books and the eagerness of their perusal, the benevolent sympathies excited by a more extended knowledge of the circumstances and sufferings of fellow-creatures,[...] (apud Buzzard, 50)

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