

“Fiery City” not without hope

R. J. Stove reports on a visit to Liège in eastern Belgium.

Connoisseurs of Belgian railway station architecture (and you all know who *you* are) will doubtless have a special place in their hearts, or at least in their viscera, for the monstrosity that since August 2009 has functioned as Liège’s train terminus. This steel-and-glass eyesore – which resembles nothing so much as the brainchild of a blindfolded terrorist who abandoned his Sydney Opera House imitation halfway through, in favour of some serious acid-dreaming – is all the more offensive because of how abundant the pleasantly pre-modern buildings are elsewhere in the city centre. Hard though it is to believe now, Liège used to be an economic powerhouse; and it looked the part.

The Industrial Revolution came earlier to Belgium than to any other Continental nation, in fact than to any nation except England. To this day Liège is often called *La Cité Ardente*, “The Fiery City.” Whilst Liège might not have had “dark satanic mills”, it had plenty of dark satanic coal-mines and iron foundries, for which, indeed, it enjoyed a European fame. A local worker would often be called a “*tête de charbon*”: literally, a “coal-head”. For most nineteenth-century inhabitants, Liège and Charleroi (99 kilometres apart from one another) represented dual antechambers to hell. In the former town’s Museum of Walloon Life visitors can still discover for themselves the replica of a coal-mining tunnel from around 1900. It is hard to imagine even rats, let alone human beings, choosing to stay in such an environment, unrelieved as the latter was by any hint of intelligent

Bismarckian – or even Bonapartist – paternalism towards working men’s basic survival.

Red-hot leftists

Not surprisingly, Liège acquired a tradition of voting for red-hot leftists. In 1950, when Belgian politics revolved around whether Léopold III should be allowed to continue as monarch, anti-Léopold riots became fiercer and bloodier in Liège than anywhere else. Long afterwards (1991) a gunman slew Deputy Prime Minister André Cools, the local Socialist Party’s boss, outside the Liège flat where Cools’s *petite amie* lived. The resultant police case turned into one of those mega-Balzacian legal sagas which drag on by the decade, involving as it did wholesale bribery, the enforced resignation of NATO’s Secretary-General, and crooked tendering for military equipment. A scarcely credible *thirteen years* after the killing, two defendants (the third had committed suicide) went to gaol; but the actual trigger-finger’s owner has yet to confess or to be identified.

Mere visitors to Liège, though, may happily avoid such high-jinks, just as it would be a particularly masochistic tourist in Melbourne who got caught up in the local Underbelly-style epic of gangsters whose names end in vowels popping other gangsters whose names end in the same vowels. There is less day-to-day criminality discernible in Liège’s streets than in those of any English-speaking metropolis known to me. After the physical (no less than the moral) squalor of London and, increasingly, Sydney, Liège is a treat. Trains to and from Liège, not to mention buses within the city’s limits,

are admirable in terms of promptitude and cleanliness. While governments in England, Australia and the USA embraced the delusion that every infrastructural problem can be solved by throwing eight-lane highways at it, Belgium preferred to invest in making an already impressive national rail grid even better. Most Liègeois – particularly in view of petrol costs – would probably find it extravagant to own a car at all, because not only does public transport work excellently on the whole (and competitively priced taxis continue for those who simply must be driven in private), but much of the city can be negotiated on foot.

Dignified poverty

It needs to be. For Liège is, in a dignified First World way, *poor*. Being in Western Europe, it does possess a more or less functional welfare system; furthermore there are fewer beggars visible (and when visible, they are far less importunate) in downtown Liège than in downtown Melbourne. But the coal and steel production stopped in the 1980s – it could achieve nothing that Third World slave labour could not supply for one-fifth of the wages – and Liège has since then been in the position of a former rust-belt centre trying to reinvent itself. No obvious landmarks exist to attract the spendthrift proletarian sightseer. The publicity given by the Liège Tourist Bureau to a museum of *washing-machines* indicates a certain desperation. Outside summer, the climate is pretty dismal; and even guidebooks admit to how little English is heard. The few foreigners I saw included a young American corporate type in an expensive fawn suit, almost

dancing with rage about how hard he found it to communicate with the locals. How he washed up there at all, I cannot conceive. *La Cité Ardente* would be the last place where any sane business would hold a management convention. (Liège's existence drives, *Deo gratias*, one more nail into the coffin of that backpackers' lie: "They speak English everywhere.") There are little telltale signs of a cash-strapped populace. Several museums are operating on reduced opening hours, thanks to the recession. In my entire stay I noticed no-one carrying a laptop (how strange after Brussels!), no youngster affixed to an iPod, and precisely one person talking into a mobile phone. Spectacular facial piercings (rings through bottom lips and similar), seemingly inescapable in London, were absent here. Enquiries about how many Liègeois have cable TV, or when their last dental appointments took place, might not be unduly welcome.

What Liège has plenty of – and this has occurred since my last visit, in 1990 – is African immigrants. Many of these are Congolese, and though illegal immigration must be a problem in Belgium as it is in other European states, the average Congolese migrant probably has a Belgian (now European Union) passport. Unless our political memories stretch back to newspaper coverage – worldwide half a century ago, but fallen into total oblivion since – of Congolese politicians such as Patrice Lumumba, Moïse Tshombe, and Joseph Kasavubu, we all too readily forget how big an empire Belgium once had. In Liège one cannot forget, for the laundries, the cafes and even the cleaning centres all count the Francophone Africans amongst their staff.

Overall what surprised me about Liège was the shock of the familiar. About forty minutes' walk from the train station – and across the river

Meuse, which bisects the city – is the area dominated by the church of Saint-Pholien. No reader of Georges Simenon's Inspector Maigret novels will need to be told more: his *Maigret and the Hundred Gibbets* (1930) is dominated by a nightmarish group of Dostoyevskyan students who congregate near the church. In 1990 the neighbourhood seemed wholly unchanged from when the novel was written. These days restaurants, dry-cleaners, and phonecard stores have sprung up, but after only a little effort of imaginative reconstruction, the Simenon reader – especially in winter's twilight – will still find the hairs standing upright on the nape of his neck.

Maigret

Simenon (who died as recently as 1989) is still something of a tutelary Liègeois deity. Not far from Saint-Pholien can be found a bust of Maigret's pipe-smoking creator, one characterised by rather embarrassing idealisation. The real Simenon wore coke-bottle glasses, had a long face, and gave the impression of a dirty-minded bank clerk straight from Central Casting; but the sculpted Simenon, underneath his fedora, is of a Rabelaisian and cherubic appearance, which will remind Australian readers of nobody so much as the late columnist Max Teichmann. Originally the bust had a pipe sticking from its mouth, but after vandals repeatedly broke off the pipe and stole it, the municipal authorities – lacking Maigret's own detective skills – shrugged their shoulders and allowed the bust to remain pipeless.

Discretion could well have been, for them, the better part of valour. Towards outsiders, most Liègeois whom I met tended to be, not exactly hostile, but defensive. If you walk into a working-class bistro and, by opening your mouth, reveal less-than-

perfect French – my own, fluent and well-pronounced though it now seems to be, would never fool a native – you can expect unwelcoming looks, although you can also expect superb and inexpensive food. I should hate to be a Brussels policeman appealing for Liègeois eyewitnesses to a crime. Restaurants display the requisite no-smoking signs (*Défense de fumer*); the Liègeois obstinately ignore them, and puff away. British author Harry Patterson, in his survey *A Tall Man in a Low Land*, compared Liège to Liverpool. For me, there seemed much merit in that comparison. Wall Street might now rule the world, but Liègeois – like Liverpoolians – never really got the memo.

There is even a minor movement among certain Liègeois to revive the Walloon language. Wikipedia has a subset where the pages are entirely in Walloon; and one evening in Liège when checking my E-mails, I noticed that the (white) youth at the next computer was tapping out in Walloon his contributions to an online discussion group.

Religion

Where religion currently fits into Liège life, who but an expert can say? Eisenhower once asserted that France had become a pagan country. He thus aroused much indignation among Frenchmen, who thought that theirs was still the actual Christian country, and that the land of Nevada divorces and freak-show California mortuaries was where paganism really dwelt. I can only report what I saw, and – equally important – what I did not see.

What I did not see was the organised head-kicking godlessness *de rigueur* in modern London. Neither in Liège nor in Brussels did I spot the atheistic (and Richard-Dawkins-sponsored) posters on the sides of London buses; nor the casual anti-Catholic insolence that seems inseparable from an ordinary

London conversation or newspaper editorial; nor the stomach-churning pornographic pictures in London phone booths. (Belgium has, of course, pornography for those wretches who want it – but the point is, it can be avoided.) Liège's cathedral (St Paul's) dates from the tenth century, and only amid the Low Countries' embarrassment of ecclesiastical riches could it have remained little known; in any place less endowed than Belgium with mediaeval triumphs, it would be honoured. So statistics about church attendance tell, as per usual, only part of the story.

Those statistics are not great, for Belgium any more than for the rest of Europe. Belgium has approximately eleven million people. Of those, more than seven million identify themselves as Catholics. But Louvain University sociologists investigating (2006) the number of Catholics who actually attended Sunday Mass discovered that only 11 per cent did. Goodness only knows how much the Catholics who do attend Sunday Mass comprehend their own faith's doctrines. Still, this problem may well be lessened by the fact that Belgium – like France and Germany but utterly unlike England and America – has an adequate, non-federal government education system. (My own Melbourne organ-teacher, the redoubtable Merrowyn Deacon, made in 2009 the tart and accurate point that “if one can speak three languages by age thirteen, then ‘self-esteem’ should take care of itself.”)

One should not paint too roseate a picture. Belgium now has a vile euthanasia law, which King Albert II shamefully endorsed, rather than abdicating as his brother Baudouin did in preference to countenancing a pro-abortion statute. Yet the extraordinarily high number of severely deformed people in Belgian cities' streets implies that there remains public uneasiness about both abortion and euthanasia:

uneasiness which makes an agreeable contrast to the doltish apathy that both outrages inspire in the Anglo mind.

Danneels' heritage

Brussels' recently retired Cardinal Godfried Danneels told *The Tablet* (31 May 2008), “My whole life has been the application of Vatican II, especially in liturgy, catechesis, the relationship between the Church and the world.” This credo he expounded, not in decent shame, but with every

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sign of glee: just as his predecessor Cardinal Leon Suenens had taken pride in proclaiming that “Vatican II is the French Revolution in the Church.” Very different, at least so far, has been the attitude of Danneels' newly appointed successor André-Joseph Léonard, former bishop of Namur in central Belgium. Bishop Léonard, by far the most pro-traditionalist member of his country's episcopate (Namur Cathedral has offered a daily Latin Mass since he took over), has been a staunch public defender of *Summorum Pontificum*.

All this suggests that a certain cautious optimism is in order regarding Belgian religious life, and Belgian life more generally. Those Anglo-American commentators who get their kicks from writing off “Old Europe” – always citing demographic data which, even when unimpeachably accurate, are often lifted out of context – should

not leap too hastily to their keyboards. Here, typing these words, is one Catholic layman who (on the strength purely of what his own eyes saw and his own ears heard) left Belgium much better pleased than he had been when he entered it.

Mindset

Portions of this pleasure came from being exposed to a regional mindset partly Latinate. As Chesterton said, “Latins are logical and have a reason for going mad.” They also have a realism that the typical Englishman long ago lost. Everything we Anglophones worry about in Western Europe, Western Europeans themselves worry about, often to the point of public protest.

There persists in Belgium, for the ordinary budget-conscious Englishman or Australian and increasingly for the ordinary budget-conscious American, a *douceur de vivre* utterly unimaginable at home. It might be the tiny little Romanesque parish church down the road, where the gift stall sells CDs of sublime seventeenth-century organ music. It might be the second-hand bookshop tucked away behind the hotel. It might be the polyglot ticket-collector waving away your proffered passport with a smile. Or it might be something as inconsequential as the pretty young blonde Liègeoise desk clerk who, grinning charmingly and mendaciously, says “*Vous parlez français très bien, monsieur.*” (Shades of the nonagenarian Oliver Wendell Holmes: “What I wouldn't give to be eighty again!”) Whichever form it takes, it leaves one abiding impression: namely, that Belgium, for a serious spiritual and cultural revival, only needs to turn the clock back to about 1960. What method can possibly save England, by contrast, less drastic than turning the clock back to 1530?

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