

Old World Charm

In Belgium, I have seen the past and it works.

By R.J. Stove

Arthur Hastings: Mind you, it's very different in France, isn't it?

Hercule Poirot: I would not know. I am not French, I am Belgian.

Arthur Hastings: Well, it's the same thing, you both eat horse-meat.

—Agatha Christie, *The Alphabet Murders*

ONE OF MONTY PYTHON'S 1970s sketches contains the profound observation, "Suddenly—nothing happened." It is a line hard to resist recalling when one ventures into Belgium's capital. For anyone who has arrived in Brussels after London's horrors, resistance is not merely hard but hopeless.

At the cross-Channel Eurostar train's London depot are all the appurtenances of the terrorism-obsessed Nanny State: endless perusal of one's passport, as if mere staring at each of its pages in turn would reveal the key to the origin of the universe; CCTV screens everywhere; swaggering boors in uniform who subject passengers to almost every possible body-searching technique short of outright indecent assault. But at the Eurostar's Brussels depot—zilch. No third degree, no screaming intercom announcements, no foot- (or knuckle-) dragging customs guards. Even the station's much dreaded pickpocketing gypsies are nowhere to be seen. I arrived on a Sunday; perhaps for the gypsies, as once for Melina Mercouri, Sunday is a day of rest.

After London, Brussels has an atmosphere difficult to describe yet somehow evoking freedom. How unpatriotic. How inimical to every concept

of "national greatness." How lovely. The tribute Alistair Cooke once paid to Ireland seems relevant for Belgium as well: "The great thing about this country is—there's always somebody who doesn't care."

Belgium might not be everyone's first choice for a pleasure jaunt, but then I was here less for pleasure than business. Before arriving, I had done everything that Australia-based sources and abundant international interlibrary loans allowed to research my biography of Belgium's leading composer, César Franck. This book has occupied me for more than a decade. It threatens to surpass in length, if not in readability, Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*.

What I could no longer postpone consulting were Franck-related archival materials available solely in two Belgian cities, one of them Brussels itself, the other Liège, Franck's birthplace. Understandably, neither Brussels's Bibliothèque Royale nor Liège's Conservatoire would allow such materials to be removed from the premises. So here I was, 11,000 miles from home, wondering if the whole project would prove an expensive disaster.

I need not have worried for a second. From both Brussels's and Liège's librarians I experienced civility, efficiency, and generosity that made me feel like no one so much as a starving Italian peasant in 1948 receiving his first taste of Marshall Plan largesse. Not even my earlier, protracted e-mail correspondence had prepared me for the conscientiousness with which these librarians smoothed my

research route. On their goodwill I shall not expatiate here. Perfect intellectual happiness has its own Chatham House rules. And what I underwent, when confronted with rare documents that I had never expected to see—including two Franck manuscripts of whose existence I had not hitherto learnt—came as close to intellectual bliss as anything I am likely to know in this life. What I supposed would require weeks of labor took mere days. There are many worse destinies than to spend extra free time in Belgium.

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While Belgium occupies no bigger an area than New Jersey, it contains more than 10.6 million people, 1.7 million of whom live in Brussels itself. The specter of loneliness is unlikely to haunt Belgians. But strangely, the place seldom feels cluttered. After the insane overcrowding of London life, Brussels seems almost like a somnolent country town, free from excessive vehicular traffic, from London's grotesque polyphony of incessant car horns (what P. J. O'Rourke called "Egyptian brake pedals"), and from the caged-rat rudeness now compulsory with public London discourse. Merely to ask directions from a stranger is to appreciate the contrast.

Me (in French): Excuse me, sir, where is the cathedral?

Brussels Stranger (in French): Over there, to your left.

This was the outcome of a similar request, several days earlier, in London:

Me (in English): Excuse me, sir, where is Highbury and Islington Underground station?

First London Stranger: (pause for thought) Humph. (second pause for thought, followed by wordless departure in opposite direction)

Me: Excuse me, sir, where is Highbury and—

Second London Stranger (dressed like corporate executive and clutching cell phone): Har the fook would Ah fookin well know, you fookin orsehole? Can't you fookin well see Ah'm fookin well on a fookin phone call, whah don't you fookin well go fook yourself, you fooker?

Such a contrast suggests that Belgium might be a country that, whatever its problems, is still run by and for adults. The Brussels hotel check-in process confirms this impression. From start to finish it lasts approximately one minute.

You subsequently enter your en suite bathroom, with vivid recollections of the discomforts inseparable from British scouring procedures. In Brussels, when you turn on the hot tap, you get hot water. When you turn on the cold tap, *le voilà*: cold water. You use a Brussels public telephone, in the full expectation—based on what London offers—that the process will be like trying to reach a specific political prisoner in Pyongyang. Behold, the Brussels telephone functions at the first attempt, and the line is clear. The train-ticket machine exudes the correct change. Is this Cartesian logic or what?

It gets better. Amazing how many doors, literally as well as metaphorically, the phrase "*Je suis australien*" opens. The Bibliothèque Royale's front-desk receptionist condoled with me about the terrible fires of February 2009, near Melbourne ("*200 morts!*"). Would "*Je suis anglais*" or "*Je suis américain*"

have led to such courteous treatment? Well, probably yes, provided that the Brit or American avoided the assumption that everything worth saying is worth saying in English. (The Brussels hotel lobby includes clocks showing the time in London, Los Angeles, Tokyo, and "Sidney": that last spelling a pleasingly provincial touch in this most cosmopolitan of towns.)

This leads us to one of the few facts familiar to almost everyone about Belgian life, apart from its beer, its chocolate, and the circumstance that its most renowned national statue is of a nude boy with a bladder problem: the language barrier.

In Belgium's north, and increasingly in Brussels itself, the locals speak Flemish, which looks the same as Dutch on paper, but sounds different in practice. South of Brussels, including in Liège, the locals speak French. Even the capital's name is something of a battleground: "Bruxelles" in French, "Brussel" in Flemish. In the capital, every street sign has to be bilingual.

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Not that French in Belgium uniformly accords with French in France. Belgians' French periodically seems strange, as if they were talking through clenched teeth. "*Bonjour monsieur, comment allez-vous?*" often emerged, to my admittedly imperfect ear, as "*Bonzour m'zieur, commendallay veur?*" At breakfast I once asked after the butter (*beurre* in French), only to be told by the waitress that she had no "beer" (which is what *beurre* sounded like on her lips). Differences in vocabulary occur also. "Seventy," which in French French is "*soixante-dix*," is in

Belgian French "*septante*." Frenchmen refer to a laundromat as "*une blanchisserie*," but each of several Brussels laundromats that I noticed called themselves "*un washing*."

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At a delightful Brussels restaurant, I met Dr. Paul Belien, whose writing has appeared in *The American Conservative*, and the Irish-born Mary Ellen Synon, whose work has appeared in *Chronicles*. Both were full of the milk of human kindness and useful tips about aspects of Belgian administration that never make it into the Anglo media. Belien has produced *A Throne in Brussels*, a murderously detailed secret history of Belgian malefaction from the country's founding in 1830 until almost last week. Reading it is like watching on stage one of those Jacobean tragedies where every character is a scumbag. Lavishly footnoted, brilliantly argued, and written in excruciatingly lucid prose, Belien's book is probably a masterpiece.

Nonetheless—call me a sanguine colonial rube if you will—a nagging doubt persists. If Belgium is so horrible, how does Belien himself prove to be so agreeable? Is wholesale crookedness, assuming that Belgium has it, really the worst thing that can befall a country? Which does more damage: the intrigues of penny-ante shysters like the Belgians Belien describes or a Woodrow Wilson's utterly sincere and utterly homicidal *mission civilisatrice*? How would any nation's past stand up to pitiless Belien-type forensic scrutiny? In Belgium's annals there at least seems to have been

Europe

no civil war causing 600,000 dead, no JFK, no LBJ, and—still more commendable—no Jefferson bombinating about equal rights while getting jiggy with the help. Could relentless national self-disgust be as fundamentally biased as the relentless national self-congratulation of Andrew Roberts?

At least *A Throne in Brussels* prompted me to undertake Modern Belgian Political Science 101, this course being aided by occasional conversations with local experts (i.e., the nearest taxi driver). As far as I can make out, Belgium is now ruled by a constantly fluctuating league dominated by the Up Your Nose With A Rubber Hose Party, the Tax Reform—Don't Make Me Laugh Party, the You'd Better Not Even Think About An Ethics Investigation Party, and the We're Gonna Make You Like Islamic Immigration If It's The Last Thing We Do Party. Most of these groups, moreover, have Flemish-speaking and French-speaking subdivisions. No use greasing the Up Your Nose With A Rubber Hose Flemish fixers' palms if you have not truckled to the UYNWARH French fixers also. And, doubtless, vice versa. Moreover, it appears that no political combination ever gets a majority in Parliament, which—as you could well have gathered from the international press since about 1995—gives the balance of power to the You Say We're A Pedophile Network Like It's A Bad Thing Party.

Shortly before my arrival, former Belgian Prime Minister Hermann Van Rompuy ("Hermann Van Rumpy-Pumpy," as British expatriates call him) became president of the European Union, defeating the Beltway's preferred candidate, one Tony Blair. It seems that Mr. Van Rompuy sought office on the following political platform:

Article 1: I'm not Tony Blair.

Article 2: I'm not Tony Blair.

Article 3: I'm not Tony Blair.

Article 4: I'm not Tony Blair.

Article 5: Since I've said four times that I'm not Tony Blair, how bad can I be?

Facially he bears a much remarked resemblance to E.T., the Extra-Terrestrial. If we must be governed by space invaders—and the recent history of Western Civ suggests that we must—then they might as well look like space invaders. Van Rompuy's prime ministerial successor, Yves Leterme, doesn't look like a space invader; he looks like a dissipated version of Matt Damon. But there is no guarantee that he will still be in charge by the time these words get printed. The next Belgian prime minister could be anyone.

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All this legislative instability feels redolent of French leadership between the wars. Georges Clemenceau begat Paul Deschanel who begat Alexandre Millerand who begat Raymond Poincaré who begat Gaston Doumergue who begat Edouard Herriot ... and so forth, like an Old Testament genealogical roll call. What puzzles and gratifies the mere foreigner is that, political chaos or not, the part of Belgium I visited appears to work.

In both Brussels and Liège, the trains run on time. If you drive, you can park your car without disgorging fees equal to the gross national product of Bangladesh. Almost every historic landmark can be reached on foot from almost every other historic landmark. Property prices, although high by current American standards, are derisory by Australian ones. Customer service personnel assume, "The customer may not always be right, but there's a chance that he is, so let's humor him." On arriving at my Liège lodgings, I uttered my usual half-apologetic "*Je suis aus-*

tralien." The Heidi Klum lookalike behind the desk answered: "*Et vous parlez français très bien.*"

And the food ... oh ye gods, the food. In a Brussels cafe one lunchtime, I ordered a sandwich with smoked salmon and mozzarella. The waiter brought in the biggest baguette that I have ever seen in my life. It looked like an edible version of the Eiffel Tower lying on its side. It was delicious, although it took me about 20 minutes to finish. "How much?" I asked, fearing that my ten-euro note would be inadequate. Total cost: three and a half euros. About \$5.

That is Belgium. Wonderful museums and art galleries. Lots of glorious architecture. Superb Gothic churches. Paris's beauties without Paris's pressures. Outbreaks of politeness everywhere. And the food.

But it is a nation that requires an effort to appreciate. You can fall in love with Venice's splendors without having read a solitary scrap of Venetian history. You can see the Swiss Alps and be moved. Not so with Belgium. So do your homework. Read *A Tall Man in a Low Land* by British journalist Harry Patterson, who is somewhat like a raunchier version of Bill Bryson. If you can already speak French, revise it. If you cannot, enroll at your nearest Alliance Française branch and acquire the rudiments. A few French phrases spoken to Belgians in a halfway decent accent will bring numerous rewards. If you demonstrate an actual knack for French conversation, they will be tempted to give you honorary citizenship.

Yes, it's corrupt. It's Old Europe. It's living beyond its means. Its unemployment rate is dreadful. On Dr. Belien's evidence, it probably shouldn't have been cobbled together anyway. And I love it. ■

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