Beef and Liberty!

A comparison of English and French cuisine and the rise of English national identity in the eighteenth century

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The rivalry between England and France is undoubtedly one of the greatest themes of the eighteenth century. For the English, the phrase ‘Beef and Liberty’ became a rallying call for those concerned about the threat of a French military invasion from abroad, and the spread of Gallic luxury perverting English values at home. This writing will explore the growth of English national identity as a response to rivalry with France, how it was expressed through the consumption of beef, and held in contrast to French cuisine.

A joyful theme for Britons free,
Happy in Beef and Liberty.

– Theodosius Forrest, The Song of the Day, 1735

It was the century of ‘the roast beef of old England’,¹ to borrow Dorothy George’s phrase. The consumption of beef was seen as a patriotic obligation that endowed its consumer with the manly virility, courage, and virtues of a freeborn Englishman. The emergent ideology of food chauvinism among the English served to underscore the nation’s economic prosperity and their superior forms of religious and political liberties, particularly in contrast to the French.

Roast beef may be regarded as an academic subject of some controversy, for food historians have long lamented the trivialising of food as merely ‘the subject for cookbooks’.² Yet food is a form of language³ and particular foodstuffs can carry a multitude of meanings. In the eighteenth century, roast beef acquired the status of national dish through England’s assiduous self-differentiation from the French.

³ See Carole Counihan, Food in the USA: A Reader (New York: Routledge, 2002).
beef was honest and substantial whereas French food was defined by its artificiality. The art of the French cook was to make bad meat edible by dressing it in elaborate sauces, and this was viewed as an implicit admission of Catholic poverty as well as of knavery.

Meat as a foodstuff is particularly rich in metaphor. The motif of blood, central to the meat system, implies violence, sexual passion, morality, kinship, and is used as the arbiter of inheritance. Most important to our discussion, blood is the unifying character of race and nation. The blood of roast beef and the blood of an Englishmen have intermingled in many symbolic repertoires of the nation. Even today, to the French we are still les Rosbifs.

At the turn of the eighteenth century, the three nations of Wales, Scotland, and England were a patchwork of distinct and separate towns and regions. The Act of Union in 1707 linked Scotland to England and Wales and united them under the establishment of a single, unitary state of Britain, yet this state retained a pluralistic and multinational character. Although, unlike England, the other kingdoms of Britain did not share such violent animosity towards the French, the emergent British national characteristics were predominately founded through rivalry with France.

National identity, as Keith Cameron has argued, is a term that is ‘used frequently but which often beggars definition’. There exists a wealth of scholarly debate on the notion of national identity, and certainly Norman Davies is correct in remarking, ‘there are as many theories on the essence of nations as there are theorists’. For the purposes of this discussion, Benedict Anderson’s oft-quoted concept of the nation as ‘an imagined political community’ shall be used. The community is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never come to know the lives of the majority of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, and yet, nevertheless, nationalism commands a sense of profound emotional legitimacy.

This imagined community is forged ‘by the social or territorial boundaries drawn to distinguish the collective self and its implicit negation, the other’. In other words, the antitheses between us and them, friends and foes often becomes often the very backbone of how we decide who we are and what we are not.

The invention of Britishness is deeply entwined to the rampant Francophile sentiment of the eighteenth-century. France was the neighbour, the enemy, and the rival, and became the archetype of Continental tyranny that the English regarded with

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8 Ibid, p. 43.
both contempt and fascination. Roast beef is merely a specific cultural symbol within a much larger framework of national consciousness.

I.

The eating of beef was long considered a vitally important component of English national identity. For centuries, foreigners travelling to England often remarked on the great quantity and quality of meat consumed by the natives.¹⁰ In 1598 a German traveller noted that the English ‘are more polite in their eating than the French, devouring less bread, but more meat, which they roast to perfection’.¹¹ Nevertheless, as Ben Rogers has noted, it is surprisingly difficult to trace the exact origins of beef as a symbol of English nationalism.¹² Numerous references to meat-eating English patriots appear throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, before reaching a zenith in the eighteenth and nineteenth. It is no coincidence that the rise of roast beef as a patriotic emblem coincides with the growth of English rivalry to France. After the Glorious Revolution of 1688,¹³ England’s Catholic neighbour across the Channel became a more or less permanent enemy, and certainly a constant rival in the battle for supremacy overseas.

At the turn of the eighteenth century the threat of French hegemony in Western Europe was substantial. France had shown herself to be willing and capable of exercising her extraordinary military might in aggressive and casually brutal ways, such as in the seizure of Strasbourg in 1681 or the devastation of Palatinate in the 1680s.¹⁴ Louis XIV’s expansionist policies in the Low Countries fuelled accusations that France was grasping after Universal Monarchy and saw English foreign policy centre on preventing the erection of a mighty Bourbon empire.¹⁵

¹¹ Paul Hentzner, Paul Hentzner’s Travels in England, During the Reign of Queen Elizabeth (London: Carlton House 1797), p. 64.
¹⁵ The balance of European power was redistributed through the peace terms fixed in the treaties of Utrecht (1713) and Rastadt (1714). Louis XIV’s dynastic and territorial ambitions were dismantled and the Grand Alliance between the French and Spanish Kingdoms were to be forever separated, much to the benefit of Great Britain. See Paul Kennedy, The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000 (London: Unwin Hyman Limited, 1988), p. 105.
From these fraught beginnings, tensions culminated into a long succession of Franco-Anglo wars beginning in 1689 and ending with the Battle of Waterloo in 1815. The Treaties of Utrecht (1713) and Rastadt (1714) served to redistribute the balance of European power, yet France was to remain a formidable force on land throughout the century while, in comparison, Britain was unchallenged at sea. In the historian Paul Kennedy’s phrase, the two nations were like a whale and an elephant, each the largest in its own domain but neither able to master the other. When not engaged in outright violent conflict, the relationship between the two powers was continuously underpinned by a deep and multi-layered rivalry; a rivalry that was to dominate the political and cultural landscape of eighteenth-century Europe.

The French were seen as employing every sort of devious or vicious means in their pursuit of Universal Hegemony. A broadside published in 1747 powerfully conveys these sentiments; *The Glory of France* depicts Louis XV with the crown of universal monarchy supported above his head by the allegorical symbols of Pride and Treachery. The devil looms to his right, whilst scattered at his feet are a number of broken treaties, clearly representative of France’s utter disregard for treaty obligations, and her willingness to ruthlessly crush all in her way.

For the English, the phrase ‘*Beef and Liberty!*’ became a patriotic rallying call. For beef, as well as being high in strength-giving protein, ennobled the heart and enriched the blood of its consumer. It was, according to Addison, a diet of beef that bred ‘that hardy race of mortals who won the fields of Cressy and Agincourt’ and one dreads to consider ‘what work our countrymen would have made of Blenheim and Ramilles if they had been fed with fricacies and ragout’. The same sentiment had been expressed a hundred years earlier in Shakespeare’s *Henry V*; at the French camp, near Agincourt, a group of French Lords falter at the thought of English soldiers, who ‘eat like wolves and fight like devils’ after ‘great meals of beef and iron and steel’ (Act 3. Sc.7: 129). In short, it was beef that turned the English into ‘a different and superior animal – a French-beating animal’.

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16 Langford, p. 4.
20 There exists a multitude of sources from throughout the eighteenth century expressing similar sentiments. For example, a satire published in *Westminster Magazine*, December 1772: ‘They [the British] will fly at the French with the stomach of hogs, | And, like storks, in a trice clear the sea of the frogs.’ See Wright, Thomas, *Caricature History of the Georges* (London: Adamant Media Corporation, 2005), p. 329.

The full quote reads: ‘The Frenchman has after his soup a dish of vegetables, where you have one of meat. You are a different and superior animal - a French-beating animal (the history of a hundred years has shown you to be so).’
England faced not only the threat of French military invasion from abroad, but also the spread of Gallic luxury and corruption at home. Patriotic moralists had long objected to the English aristocracy’s taste for foreign Catholic food. French high cuisine had become increasingly influential in England, to the extent where it came to be celebrated by the ruling Whig elite as the height of fashion and good taste. Writing in the *Tatler*, Addison mocks the ‘false delicacies’ who indulge in fashionable French cuisine:

> I look upon a French ragout to be as pernicious to the stomach as a glass of spirits – The rules among these false delicacies, are to be as contradictory as they can be to nature. Without expecting the return of hunger, they eat for appetite, and prepare dishes not to allay, but to excite it. They admit of nothing at their tables in its natural form, or without some disguise.

In reality, it appears only a small minority of English Whig-grandees employed French cooks and dined on ‘French Quelque Choses and fantastick Fricasies’ in place of ‘old fashion’d and honest substantial English Food’. In 1792, Arthur Young claimed in that ‘every man in Europe that can afford a great table, either keep a French cook, or one instructed in the same manner’, although the true number remains uncertain.

The differences between French and English cookery has often been explained by an abundance of superior quality meat enjoyed by the English. Therefore, unlike the French, the English had no need to cook their meat with great skill, disguise its flavour, or eke it out in made dishes. There is an obvious element of propaganda to this claim, yet even in the nineteenth century the great French chef Urbain Duois, who served the King of Prussia, attributed the merits of English cooking to the superior quality of English meat. In comparison, French culinary art was deemed unnatural and overtly

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23 Addison, p. 332.
26 As expressed by Robert Campbell, ‘Fish, when it has passed through the Hands of a French Cook, is no more Fish; it has neither the Taste, Smell, nor Appearance of Fish. It, and every thing else, is dressed in Masquerade, seasoned with slow Poisons, and every Dish pregnant with nothing, but the Seeds of Diseases both Cronick and acute.’ Cited in Stephen Mennell, *All Manners of Food: Eating and taste in England and France from the Middle Ages to the Present* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois press, 1996), p. 102.
27 Mennell, p. 102.
elaborate. French cooking transformed ingredients so that items were not identifiably related to how they appeared in nature. The French penchant for elaborate and expensive sauces was typically regarded as a means to disguise poor-quality French meat, and therefore as another example of French deception and treachery.

The English kept their food close to its natural state, tending to adapt traditional medieval practices of roasting and boiling meat. By doing so, the Englishman is a ‘Brute’, a part of the nature he devours, as well as being a masculine figure displaying his dominance over the rest of nature.

The close association of meat and patriotism was made manifest in the multitude of ‘beefsteake’ clubs that sprung up across England, the first of which appeared around 1705. It was here that thespians, writers, artists, and their patrons would gather to eat steak, swap stories, and revel in their patriotic pride.

The most well documented was The Sublime Society of Beefsteaks, founded in 1735. The twenty-four members met every Saturday in Covent Garden and never suffered ‘any diet except Beef-steaks to appear’. Of course, the implication that everyone in England could afford roast beef was wishful thinking; for the majority ‘[O]f roast beef, they only know the tune’. Yet the multitude of drinking songs could be enjoyed by all members of the eighteenth-century class structure, and had the ability to foster an ‘imagined community’ centred on beef, even for those unable to engage in the physical act of consuming it.

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28 Louis XIV’s gardeners were famous for producing peas in April, his cooks for producing ices in the height of summer, reflective, to the English, of the artificiality that defined French food (Rogers, p. 39).
30 Rogers, p. 34.
31 Ibid., p. 79.
32 In the 1780s the Prince of Wales joined the Sublime Society, further connecting Beef and the Kingdom. See Broglio Technologies of the Picturesque: British Art, Poetry, and Instruments, 1750–1830 (Massachusetts: Rosemont Publishing & Printing Corp, 2008), p. 184.
33 The society uniform consisted of a blue coat and a buff waistcoat with brass buttons impressed with the gridiron and club motto ‘Beef and Liberty’; Walter Arnold, The Life and Death of the Sublime Society of Beefsteaks (Hansebooks 2017), p. 4.
Liberty is a historically valued characteristic of English national identity. The English ‘impatience of anything like slavery’ came to be forever enshrined in the words of James Thomson: ‘Rule Britannia, rule the waves | Britons never will be slaves’. Throughout the century British liberty was seen as a unique political freedom that was worth an active defence, particularly from the tyranny of Continental Catholicism and absolute monarchy. The strong English tradition of common law dating back to the Magna Carta fostered the belief, particularly during the seventeenth century, that England was governed by an ancient constitution that guaranteed the ‘rights of the freeborn Englishman’. By the 1760s and the 1770s, liberty had been embraced by all political factions, and was a cause and concept essential to the interests of the ‘genteel and middling sort’ and their emergent liberal values of free trade, property rights, and autonomy from government in the ‘private’ spheres of religious belief, economy, and family.

This leading political idea of liberty was common to all Englishmen and had been inextricably bound up with Protestantism since the Reformation. The belief that ‘Popery and slavery, like two sisters, go hand in hand’ was widespread and long-held. Thus, English Protestant freedom was defined against the horrors of Continental enslavement.

The popular cant term for the French polity was ‘Popery and Wooden shoes’ and served as a reminded of the miseries of priest-ridden and clog-wearing peasants on the other side of the Channel. The expression had been prominent in the previous century; for example, the Republican Edmund Ludlow (1617–92) has been ‘loathed’ when passing through France to see such a number of idle drones, who in ridiculous habits wherein they place a great part of their religion, are to be seen in every part eating the bread of the credulous multitude, and leaving them to be distinguished from the

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38 Rogers, p. 44.
41 The author of *A Character of France* asserted in 1659: ‘as for their liberties their feet enjoy, they cannot boast much of being called free, since if not by nature they are brought to hooves; yet by their monstrous clogs are near resembled to them’ (cited in Trevelyan, p. 354).
42 Trevelyan, p. 353.
inhabitants of other countries by thin cheeks, canvas clothing, and wooden shoes’. The conception that Catholicism and despotism were naturally aligned against all liberty of action and thought gave rise to a long tradition of satirical art that heavily played upon the gustatory habits of both the British and the French, including Hogarth’s *The Gate of Calais* (1748), which repeated in print the sentiments expressed by Ludlow nearly 100 years previously.

By the 1790s the possibility arose that the discontented in Britain would heed the revolutionary call of France and overthrow the established order. One handbill distributed in 1792–3 urged Britons to ‘turn a deaf Ear to the Enemies of the King, the Church and the Constitution, and do not leave the plain wholesome ROAST BEEF OF OLD ENGLAND, for the meagre and unsubstantial Diet of these political French Cooks’. Gillray’s *French Liberty. British Slavery* (figure 1) is a visual representation of these words, which he claimed to have engraved ‘pro bono publico’. The emaciated sans-culotte extols the virtues of post-revolutionary France whilst dining on leeks; in contrast, the figure of John Bull bemoans the heavy burden of taxation as he begins to gorge on

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43 Cited in Trevelyan, p. 353.
45 Ibid.
an immense slab of roasted beef. Of course, the central joke is the ironic mis-pairing of the textual label and the pictorial image. By playing upon the well-established contrast between French and British diets, Gillray distinguishes the nature of British and French liberty by illuminating the slavery and impoverishment within post-Revolutionary France.

IV.

The life and works of William Hogarth embody the spirit of eighteenth-century English nationalism. One of the founding members of *The Sublime Society of Beefsteaks*, he held an ‘almost mythical insistence on the eating of beef as a means of acquiring the virility and virtues of the sturdy freeborn Englishman’.46

One of his most popular prints, *The Gate of Calais* is a powerful expression of food chauvinism. Originally titled, *O’ the Roast Beef of Old England*, the work is a dramatic visual satire on the relationship between consumption and morality. Hogarth’s image vividly portrays what he saw as the ‘farcical pomp of War, [the] pompous parade of Religion’, and the ‘poverty, slavery, and innate insolence’ that defined the French nation.47

The scene is laid at the town gate of Calais, where a French kitchen porter appears straining under the weight of an immense joint of imported English beef.48 A gluttonous monk appears anxious to bless and cut the meat, whilst ‘lean, ragged and tawdry’ French soldiers salivate as they watch the joint pass by, having only their kettle of ‘soup meagre’ for food. In the right foreground, a melancholy and miserable tartan-clad highlander, a refugee to France following the failure of the Jacobite rebellion of 1745,49 is left with only a bit of bread and an onion to sustain himself with.

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48 The focal point of the image is the bright and bloody joint of meat, which as Hogarth’s title indicates, is intended to characterise the English nation as a whole.
49 Charles Edward Stuart landed in Scotland in July 1745 and attempted claim the British crown on behalf of his father James Stuart, the heir of James II who had been dethroned in 1688. Having conquered Scotland, Bonnie Prince Charles advanced as far south as Derby before finally being defeated at Culloden Moor in 1746 (Jarrett, p. 20).
Figure 2. William Hogarth, Charles Mosley, The Gate of Calais, or, O' the Roast Beef of Old England, 1749, etching and engraving on paper, 432 x 569mm, image courtesy of The Tate, London.

The print is awash with centuries old Protestant stereotypes of members of the Catholic faith, and has since been referred to as ‘the best known anti-Catholic picture of the period’.\(^{50}\) This is high praise considering the proliferation of British satire conveying vivid anti-Catholic messages; satirists continuously represented the French Catholic clergy as fat gluttons who gorged themselves on frogs legs, leeks, fricassees and other strange foodstuffs, at the expense of the emaciated and exploited French peoples. Each threat of French invasion brought with it an outburst of satirical prints depicting Catholic clergymen accompanying the French army with their tools of persecution, each ‘eager to cram Catholic superstition and idolatry down English throats’\(^{51}\).

Hogarth’s The Gate of Calais encompasses many of these themes. As Kenneth Bendiner has stated, the time of year is undoubtedly Lent given that the French street


vendors shown in the bottom left-hand corner sell nothing but fish.\textsuperscript{52} As such, the monk’s delight in the beef emphasises the widely held British view of Catholic corruption and hypocrisy, particularly as his ample belly shows he has found no difficulty in acquiring food for himself. Furthermore, Hogarth himself can be seen sketching in the middle distance with the heavy hand of French tyranny upon his shoulder, while the religious procession in the distance indicates the superstition and priest-craft of the Roman Catholic Church.

Most notably, \textit{The Gate of Calais} conveys the theme of consumption. Indeed, Ben Rogers has argued that this theme is so substantial that Hogarth painted ‘the gate to look like a mouth, its portcullis representing teeth, the drawbridge a tongue’.\textsuperscript{53} The work embodies the powerful sense of food chauvinism among the English, and was immensely popular for its ‘downright, fair play, John Bull’ quality.\textsuperscript{54}

\textbf{V.}

That roast beef became synonymous with Englishness is wonderfully displayed in Joseph Addison’s elaborate, if somewhat unreliable, history of renowned beef eaters: King Arthur, who sat down to a whole roasted ox; the Black Prince, who was a professed lover of brisket; and Queen Elizabeth’s maids of honour who instead of tea and bread and butter, were allowed three rumps of beef for their breakfast.\textsuperscript{55}

Times have changed, and few now would consider showing their patriotism in the manner of the notorious Duke of Norfolk when he ‘ate some six pounds of beefsteaks at one sitting’.\textsuperscript{56} The decline of roast beef as a patriotic emblem has been largely overlooked as a subject matter. The growth of the Empire and the importation of vast quantities of other foodstuffs from across the globe may suffice as one explanation, for the English are more associated now with eating curry than roast beef; or perhaps the easy availability of cheaper meats has simply displaced it.

Referring back to Benedict Anderson’s definition of the nation as an ‘imagined political community’, it has become apparent that throughout the discourse of the eighteenth century, food, and in particular roast beef, fostered a sense of English national identity. France was painted as the antithesis of the freeborn English, an image that was continuously reinforced in theatres, in songs, in literature, and in satirical art. The construction of France as the alien \textit{other}, served to build a sense of English collective identity and of belonging.

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\textsuperscript{52} Kenneth Bendiner, \textit{Food in Painting from the Renaissance to the Present} (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2004), p. 68.
\textsuperscript{53} Rogers, p. 101.
\textsuperscript{55} Addison, p. 331.
\textsuperscript{56} Temple Bar, \textit{Beef and Liberty} (Vol. 38, 1873), p. 399.
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