

HOW TO BE A BRIT

George Mikes was born in 1912 in Siklós, Hungary. He studied law and received his doctorate in Budapest University. He became a journalist and was sent to London as a correspondent to cover the Munich crisis. He came for a fortnight but stayed on and made England his home. During the Second World War he broadcast for the BBC Hungarian Service where he remained until 1951. He continued working as a freelance critic, broadcaster and writer until his death in 1987.

In 1946 he published *How to be an Alien* which went into thirty editions and identified the author as a humorist, although he had not intended the book to be funny. His other books include *Übber Alles*, *Little Cabbages*, *Shakespeare and Myself*, *Italy for Beginners*, *How to Unite Nations*, *How to be Inimitable*, *How to Scrape Skies*, *How to Tango*, *The Land of the Rising Yen*, *How to Run a Stately Home* (with the Duke of Bedford), *Switzerland for Beginners*, *How to be Decadent*, *Tsi-Tsa*, *English Humour for Beginners*, *How to be Poor*, *How to be a Guru* and *How to be God*. He wrote a study of the Hungarian Revolution and is also the author of *A Study of Infamy*, an analysis of the Hungarian secret political police system, *Arthur Koestler: The Story of a Friendship* and *The Riches of the Poor: A Journey round the World Health Organization*. On his seventieth birthday, in 1982, he published his autobiography, *How to be Seventy*.

Nicolas Bentley was born in Highgate in 1907 and educated at University College School, London, and Heatherley School of Art. He was an artist, author, publisher and illustrator of more than sixty books – including works by Hilaire Belloc, T. S. Eliot, Damon Runyon, Lawrence Durrell and many others. He died in 1978.

GEORGE MIKES

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Nicolas Bentley drew the pictures



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PREFACE

Back in 1945, when André Deutsch was trying to build up a new publishing firm, he asked me if I had anything for him. I told him that I was fiddling about with some little essays which were linked by a basic idea: how to be an alien. Why I was staying on the Isle of Wight I can no longer remember, but I must have been doing so, or why would he have come there to collect the manuscript?

He enjoyed what he read, but told me that there was not enough of it for a book. So I sat down one afternoon and added five thousand more words. If anyone had said to me that I ought to take more trouble, since forty years later this book would still be selling about thirty thousand copies a year in paperback, not to mention going into a new hardback edition for which I would have to write a preface – well, I would have told that person, gently but firmly, that he or she ought to have his or her head examined. Indeed I would probably have said the same thing if told that I would still be here to write anything in forty years time, and that André would still be around – though disguised as a distinguished old boy – to publish it.

How to be an Alien was a *cri de coeur*, a desperate cry for help: oh God, look at me, I have fallen among strange people! ‘But it's such a *funny* book,’ people say. Perhaps it is. I hope it is. But it's not unknown for shrieks, moans, whoops and ululations to sound funny to the uninvolved.

In due course I added two further shrieks to that first one: *How to be Inimitable* in 1960, when we had started to slip but still had an Empire and refused to acknowledge much change, and *How to be Decadent* in 1977. All three books were illustrated by my great and much-missed friend, Nicolas Bentley.

During all those years since 1945, something rather curious was happening: as I strove to stop being an alien and to become a true Brit, Britain was striving to cast off its peculiar and lofty insularity and become one with the aliens, a part of the Continent (almost), just another member of the E.E.C. It often seems to me that I have failed in my endeavour; but compared with Britain I have succeeded gloriously.

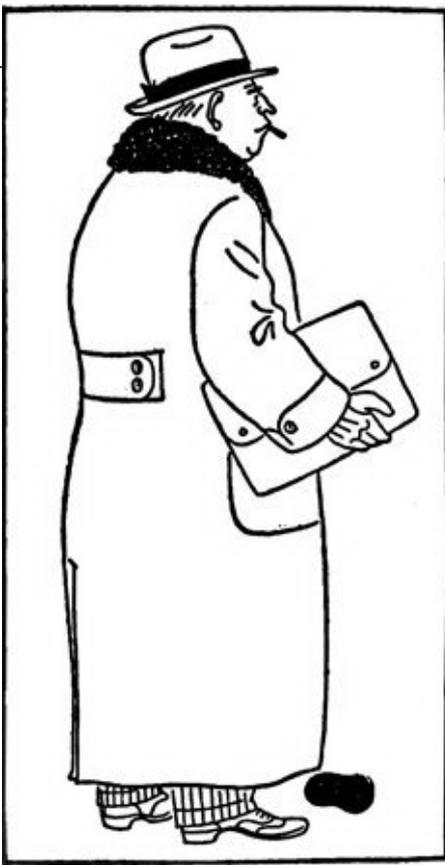
HOW TO BE AN



A HANDBOOK FOR BEGINNERS AND ADVANCED PUPILS

‘I have seen much to hate here, much to forgive. But in a world where England is finished and dead, I do not wish to live.’

ALICE DUER MILLER: *The White Cliffs*



It's easy

PREFACE TO THE 24th IMPRESSION

THE reception given to this book when it first appeared in the autumn of 1946, was at once a pleasant surprise and a disappointment for me. A surprise, because the reception was so kind; a disappointment for the same reason.

Let me explain.

The first part of this statement needs little amplification. Even people who are not closely connected with the publishing trade will be able to realize that it is very nice – I'm sorry, I'd better be a little more English: a not totally unpleasant thing for a completely unknown author to run into three impressions within a few weeks of publication and thereafter into another twenty-one.

What is my grievance, then? It is that this book has completely changed the picture I used to cherish of myself. This was to be a book of defiance. Before its publication I felt myself a man who was going to tell the English where to get off. I had spoken my mind regardless of consequences; I thought I was brave and outspoken and expected either to go unnoticed or to face a storm. But no storm came. I expected the English to be up in arms against me but they patted me on the back; I expected the British nation to rise in wrath but all they said, was: 'quite amusing'. It was indeed a bitter disappointment.

While the Rumanian Radio was serializing (without my permission) *How to be an Alien* as an anti-British tract, the Central Office of Information rang me up here in London and asked me to allow the book to be translated into Polish for the benefit of those many Polish refugees who were then settling in this country. 'We want our friends to see us in this light,' the man said on the telephone. This was hard to bear for my militant and defiant spirit. 'But it's not such a favourable light,' I protested feebly. 'It's a very human light and that is the most favourable,' retorted the official. I was crushed.

A few weeks later my drooping spirit was revived when I heard of a suburban bank manager whose wife had brought this book home to him remarking that she had found it fairly amusing. The gentleman in question sat down in front of his open fire, put his feet up and read the book right through with a continually darkening face. When he had finished, he stood up and said:

'Downright impertinence.'

And threw the book into the fire.

He was a noble and patriotic spirit and he did me a great deal of good. I wished there had been more like him in England. But I could never find another.

Since then I have actually written about a dozen books; but I might as well have never written anything else. I remained the author of *How to be an Alien* even after I had published a collection of serious essays. Even Mr Somerset Maugham complained about this type of treatment bitterly and repeatedly. Whatever he did, he was told that he would never write another *Of Human Bondage*; Arnold Bennett in spite of fifty other works remained the author of *The Old Wives' Tale* and nothing else; and Mr Robert Graves is just the author of the Claudius books. These authors are much more eminent than I am; but their problem is the same. At the moment I am engaged in writing a 750-page picaresque novel set in ancient

Sumeria. It is taking shape nicely and I am going to get the Nobel Prize for it. But it will be of no use: I shall still remain the author of *How to be an Alien*.

I am not complaining. One's books start living their independent lives soon enough, just like one's children. I love this book; it has done almost as much for me as I have done for it. Yet, however loving a parent you may be, it hurts your pride a little if you are only known, acknowledged and accepted as the father of your eldest child.

In 1946 I took this manuscript to André Deutsch, a young man who had just decided to try his luck as a publisher. He used to go, once upon a time, to the same school as my younger brother. I knew him from the old days and it was quite obvious to me even then, in Budapest when he was only twelve and wore shorts, that he would make an excellent publisher in London if he only had the chance. So I offered my book to him and as, at that time, he could not get manuscripts from better known authors, he accepted it with a sigh. He suggested that Nicolas Bentley should be asked to 'draw the pictures'. I liked the idea but I said he would turn the suggestion down. Once again I was right: he did turn it down. Eventually, however, he was persuaded to change his mind.

Mr Deutsch was at that time working for a different firm. Four years after the publication of this book, and after the subsequent publication of three other Mikes-Bentley books, he left this firm while I stayed with them and went on working with another popular and able cartoonist, David Langdon. Now, however, André Deutsch has bought all the rights of my past and future output from his former firm and the original team of Deutsch, Bentley and myself are together again under the imprint of the first named gentleman. We are all twelve years older and Mr Deutsch does not wear shorts any more, or not in the office, at any rate.

'When are you going to write another *How to be an Alien*?' Deutsch and Bentley ask me from time to time and I am sure they mean it kindly.

They cannot quite make out the reply I mutter in answer to their friendly query. It is: 'Never, if I can help it.'

London, May 1958

GEORGE MIKES

PREFACE

I BELIEVE, without undue modesty, that I have certain qualifications to write on 'how to be an alien.' I am an alien myself. What is more, I have been an alien all my life. Only during the first twenty-six years of my life I was not aware of this plain fact. I was living in my own country, a country full of aliens, and I noticed nothing particular or irregular about myself; then I came to England, and you can imagine my painful surprise.

Like all great and important discoveries it was a matter of a few seconds. You probably all know from your schooldays how Isaac Newton discovered the law of gravitation. An apple fell on his head. This incident set him thinking for a minute or two, then he exclaimed joyfully: 'Of course! The gravitation constant is the acceleration per second that a mass of one gram causes at a distance of one centimetre.' You were also taught that James Watt one day went into the kitchen where cabbage was cooking and saw the lid of the saucepan rise and fall. 'Now let me think,' he murmured – 'let me think.' Then he struck his forehead and the steam engine was discovered. It was the same with me, although circumstances were rather different.

It was like this. Some years ago I spent a lot of time with a young lady who was very proud and conscious of being English. Once she asked me – to my great surprise – whether I would marry her. 'No,' I replied, 'I will not. My mother would never agree to my marrying a foreigner.' She looked at me a little surprised and irritated, and retorted: 'I, a foreigner? What a silly thing to say. I am English. You are the foreigner. And your mother, too.' I did not give in. 'In Budapest, too?' I asked her. 'Everywhere,' she declared with determination. 'Truth does not depend on geography. What is true in England is also true in Hungary and in North Borneo and Venezuela and everywhere.'

I saw that this theory was as irrefutable as it was simple. I was startled and upset. Mainly because of my mother whom I loved and respected. Now, I suddenly learned what she really was.

It was a shame and bad taste to be an alien, and it is no use pretending otherwise. There is no way out of it. A criminal may improve and become a decent member of society. A foreigner cannot improve. Once a foreigner, always a foreigner. There is no way out for him. He may become British; he can never become English.

So it is better to reconcile yourself to the sorrowful reality. There are some noble English people who might forgive you. There are some magnanimous souls who realize that it is not your fault, only your misfortune. They will treat you with condescension, understanding and sympathy. They will invite you to their homes. Just as they keep lap-dogs and other pets, they are quite prepared to keep a few foreigners.

The title of this book, *How to be an Alien*, consequently expresses more than it should. How to be an alien? One should not be an alien at all. There are certain rules, however, which have to be followed if you want to make yourself as acceptable and civilized as you possibly can.

Study these rules, and imitate the English. There can be only one result: if you don't succeed in imitating them you become ridiculous; if you do, you become even more ridiculous.



I. How to be a General Alien

A WARNING TO BEGINNERS

IN ENGLAND* everything is the other way round.

On Sundays on the Continent even the poorest person puts on his best suit, tries to look respectable, and at the same time the life of the country becomes gay and cheerful; in England even the richest peer or motor-manufacturer dresses in some peculiar rags, does not shave, and the country becomes dull and dreary. On the Continent there is one topic which should be avoided – the weather; in England, if you do not repeat the phrase ‘Lovely day, isn't it?’ at least two hundred times a day, you are considered a bit dull. On the Continent Sunday papers appear on Monday; in England – a country of exotic oddities – they appear on Sunday. On the Continent people use a fork as though a fork were a shovel; in England they turn it upside down and push everything – including peas - on top of it.

On a continental bus approaching a request-stop the conductor rings the bell if he wants his bus to go on without stopping; in England you ring the bell if you want the bus to stop. On the Continent stray cats are judged individually on their merit – some are loved, some are only respected; in England they are universally worshipped as in ancient Egypt. On the Continent

people have good food; in England people have good table manners.

On the Continent public orators try to learn to speak fluently and smoothly; in England they take a special course in Oxonian stuttering. On the Continent learned persons love to quote Aristotle, Horace, Montaigne and show off their knowledge; in England only uneducated people show off their knowledge, nobody quotes Latin and Greek authors in the course of a conversation, unless he has never read them.

On the Continent almost every nation whether little or great has openly declared at one time or another that it is superior to all other nations; the English fight heroic wars to combat these dangerous ideas without ever mentioning which is *really* the most superior race in the world. Continental people are sensitive and touchy; the English take everything with an exquisite sense of humour – they are only offended if you tell them that they have no sense of humour. On the Continent the population consists of a small percentage of criminals, a small percentage of honest people and the rest are a vague transition between the two; in England you find a small percentage of criminals and the rest are honest people. On the other hand, people on the Continent either tell you the truth or lie; in England they hardly ever lie but they would not dream of telling you the truth.

Many continentals think life is a game; the English think cricket is a game.

INTRODUCTION

THIS is a chapter on how to introduce people to one another.

The aim of introduction is to conceal a persons identity. It is very important that you should not pronounce anybody's name in a way that the other party may be able to catch it. Generally speaking, your pronunciation is a sound guarantee for that. On the other hand, if you are introduced to someone there are two important rules to follow.

1. If he stretches out his hand in order to shake yours, you must not accept it. Smile vaguely, and as soon as he gives up the hope of shaking you by the hand, you stretch out your own hand and try to catch *his* in vain. This game is repeated until the greater part of the afternoon or evening has elapsed. It is extremely likely that this will be the most amusing part of the afternoon or evening, anyway.

2. Once the introduction has been made you have to inquire after the health of your new acquaintance.

Try the thing in your own language. Introduce the persons, let us say, in French and murmur their names. Should they shake hands and ask:

‘Comment allez-vous?’

‘Comment allez-vous?’ – it will be a capital joke, remembered till their last days.

Do not forget, however, that your new friend who makes this touchingly kind inquiry after your state of health does not care in the least whether you are well and kicking or dying of delirium tremens. A dialogue like this:

HE: ‘How d'you do?’

You: ‘General state of health fairly satisfactory. Slight insomnia and a rather bad corn on left foot. Blood pressure low, digestion slow but normal.’

– well, such a dialogue would be unforgivable.

In the next phase you must not say ‘Pleased to meet you.’ This is one of the very few lies you must never utter because, for some unknown reason, it is considered vulgar. You must not say ‘Pleased to meet you,’ even if you are definitely disgusted with the man.

A few general remarks:

1. Do not click your heels, do not bow, leave off gymnastic and choreographic exercises altogether for the moment.

2. Do not call foreign lawyers, teachers, dentists, commercial travellers and estate agents ‘Doctor.’ Everybody knows that the little word ‘doctor’ only means that they are Central Europeans. This is painful enough in itself, you do not need to remind people of it all the time.

Which hand will you have?

THE WEATHER

THIS is the most important topic in the land. Do not be misled by memories of your youth when, on the Continent, wanting to describe someone as exceptionally dull, you remarked: 'He is the type who would discuss the weather with you.' In England this is an ever-interesting, even thrilling topic, and you must be good at discussing the weather.

EXAMPLES FOR CONVERSATION

For Good Weather

'Lovely day, isn't it?'
'Isn't it *beautiful*?'
'The sun...'
'Isn't it gorgeous?'
'Wonderful, isn't it?'
'It's so nice and hot...'
'Personally, I think it's so nice when it's hot– isn't it?'
'I adore it – don't you?'

For Bad Weather

'Nasty day, isn't it?'
'Isn't it dreadful?'
'The rain... I hate rain...'
'I don't like it at all. Do you?'
'Fancy such a day in July. Rain in the morning, then a bit of sunshine, and then rain, rain, rain, all day long.'
'I remember exactly the same July day in 1936.'
'Yes, I remember too.'
'Or was it in 1928?'
'Yes, it was.'



'Good afternoon!'

'Or in 1939?'

'Yes, that's right.'

Now observe the last few sentences of this conversation. A very important rule emerges from it. You must never contradict anybody when discussing the weather. Should it hail and snow, should hurricanes uproot the trees from the sides of the road, and should someone remark to you: 'Nice day, isn't it?' – answer without hesitation: 'Isn't it lovely?'

Learn the above conversation by heart. If you are a bit slow in picking things up, learn at least one conversation, it would do wonderfully for any occasion.

If you do not say anything else for the rest of your life, just repeat this conversation, you still have a fair chance of passing as a remarkably witty man of sharp intellect, keen observation and extremely pleasant manners.

English society is a class society, strictly organized almost on corporative lines. If you doubt this, listen to the weather forecasts. There is always a different weather forecast for farmers. You often hear statements like this on the radio:

'To-morrow it will be cold, cloudy and foggy; long periods of rain will be interrupted by short periods of showers.'

And then:

'Weather forecast for farmers. It will be fair and warm, many hours of sunshine.'

You must not forget that the farmers do grand work of national importance and deserve better weather.

It happened on innumerable occasions that nice, warm weather had been forecast and rain and snow fell all day long, or *vice versa*. Some people jumped rashly to the conclusion that something must be wrong with the weather forecasts. They are mistaken and should be more careful with their allegations.

I have read an article in one of the Sunday papers and now I can tell you what the situation really is. All troubles are caused by anti-cyclones. (I don't quite know what anti-cyclones are but this is not important; I hate cyclones and am very anti-cyclone myself.) The two naughtiest anti-cyclones are the Azores and the Polar anti-cyclones.

The British meteorologists forecast the *right* weather – as it really *should* be – and then these impertinent little anti-cyclones interfere and mess up everything.

That again proves that if the British kept to themselves and did not mix with foreign things like Polar and Azores anti-cyclones they would be much better off.

SOUL AND UNDERSTATEMENT

FOREIGNERS have souls; the English haven't.

On the Continent you find any amount of people who sigh deeply for no conspicuous reason, yearn, suffer and look in the air extremely sadly. This is soul.

The worst kind of soul is the great Slav soul. People who suffer from it are usually very deep thinkers. They may say things like this: 'Sometimes I am so merry and sometimes I am so sad. Can you explain why?' (You cannot, do not try.) Or they may say: 'I am so mysterious.... I sometimes wish I were somewhere else than where I am.' (Do not say: 'I wish you were.') Or 'When I am alone in a forest at night-time and jump from one tree to another I often think that life is so strange.'

All this is very deep: and just soul, nothing else.

The English have no soul; they have the understatement instead.

If a continental youth wants to declare his love to a girl, he kneels down, tells her that she is the sweetest, the most charming and ravishing person in the world, that she has *something* in her, something peculiar and individual which only a few hundred thousand other women have and that he would be unable to live one more minute without her. Often, to give a little more emphasis to the statement, he shoots himself on the spot. This is a normal, week-day declaration of love in the more temperamental continental countries. In England the boy pats his adored one on the back and says softly: 'I don't object to you, you know.' If he is quite mad with passion, he may add: 'I rather fancy you, in fact.'

If he wants to marry a girl, he says:



'My soul is all an Aching Void' – John Wesley

'I say... would you?...'

If he wants to make an indecent proposal:

'I say... what about...'

Overstatement, too, plays a considerable part in English social life. This takes mostly the

form of someone remarking: 'I say...' and then keeping silent for three days on end.

TEA

THE trouble with tea is that originally it was quite a good drink.

So a group of the most eminent British scientists put their heads together, and made complicated biological experiments to find a way of spoiling it.

To the eternal glory of British science their labour bore fruit. They suggested that if you do not drink it clear, or with lemon or rum and sugar, but pour a few drops of cold milk into it, and no sugar at all, the desired object is achieved. Once this refreshing, aromatic, oriental beverage was successfully transformed into colourless and tasteless gargling-water, it suddenly became the national drink of Great Britain and Ireland – still retaining, indeed usurping, the high-sounding title of tea.

There are some occasions when you must not refuse a cup of tea, otherwise you are judged an exotic and barbarous bird without any hope of ever being able to take your place in civilised society.

If you are invited to an English home, at five o'clock in the morning you get a cup of tea. It is either brought in by a heartily smiling hostess or an almost malevolently silent maid. When you are disturbed in your sweetest morning sleep you must not say: 'Madame (or Mabel), I think you are a cruel, spiteful and malignant person who deserves to be shot.' On the contrary, you have to declare with your best five o'clock smile: 'Thank you so much. I do adore a cup of early morning tea, especially early in the morning.' If they leave you alone with the liquid, you may pour it down the washbasin.

Then you have tea for breakfast; then you have tea at eleven o'clock in the morning; then after lunch;



The cup that cheers

then you have tea for tea; then after supper; and again at eleven o'clock at night.

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