The EUROPEAN CONSERVATIVE

THE PHILOSOPHY OF TOXOPHILY, PART I: ARCHERY AS CIVILISATION

Posted on March 20, 2023

Archery takes that great inheritance of which we've been robbed and retrieves it in distilled and concentrated form.

Category: Essay
Tags: archery, civilisation, nostalgia, Sebastian Morello, toxophily

My friend and I stood in a large fenced-off garden, looking down the lawn at a 3-D target, a big foam boar propped up by an iron peg at the far end. An arrow was 'knocked' onto his hand-woven Flemish twist string. He drew it back to his cheek bone where it remained for half a second before the elven limbs of his finely made field-recurve bow sprung forward, 'loosing' the arrow, whose brass-finished head a millisecond later sunk deep into the false creature's chest. "Shot!" I exclaimed, at which he nodded, carefully masking his self-satisfaction but not wholly succeeding in doing so. His teenage son stood by with a tray on which sat two china cups filled with strong tea. We sipped our tea and made appreciative noises towards the boy. Turning back to our counterfeit quarry, I placed an arrow that I made some years ago (and has served me very well) onto the string of my longbow. The shaft stood to attention next to the arrow that it had followed. "I think we're ready to take on the real thing in France," remarked my fellow archer, "my pal over there said we can use his country place for bowhunting anytime." Now there's a thought…

Shooting those arrows made for a blissful afternoon, and a fitting way to prepare for a lecture on the anthropological assumptions of moral progressivism which I delivered an hour later to a room full of gentlemen who, from what I could tell, wholly belonged in spirit to a nobler era than the one in which we've been caught stumbling about in the dark. It was for this reason, perhaps, that archery was an apt preparation, for those hours of toxophilite leisure had something of the 18th century about them.

I took up archery in my early teenagerhood, and I did so—with its link to the ancient world and its slowly learned cryptic terminology—essentially for reasons of nostalgia. Nostalgia is typically considered today only in pejorative terms, but really the word denotes a deep and noble brace of emotions, perhaps the most upright emotions we shall ever possess. *Nostalgia* is a strange Latinised Greek compound consisting of the Homeric word *nóstos*, meaning 'homecoming,' and *álgos*, meaning 'sorrow.' This concoction of ancient Hellenic idioms and Latin rule-bending was coined at the beginning of the 18th century and encapsulates the story of that era in the larger drama of the West.

Englishmen, looking over the Channel and seeing the disappearance of old Europe and the arrival of *the Enlightenment*—a euphemism for intellectual, moral, and political darkness—were filled with nostalgia. In obedience to this composite of emotions, and in protest against the looming modern world, they took up the longbow (a weapon that had laid dormant since the Tudor-era humanist Roger Ascham made a last defence of it with his 1545 book *Toxophilus*, which was also the first defence of it in the English language).

Many archery clubs were founded in the 18th century, expressing a proto-medievalism that celebrated Merry England, complete with elaborate knightly costumes and all the pageantry of a Renaissance festival. Membership to such clubs was exclusive to the aristocracy, excluding the rising middle-class Whigs who had captured England at the ousting of the Stuarts (they might have grabbed everything else, it was thought, but they weren't going to claim the *old* England that they'd vanquished). Incidentally, one of the oldest of these clubs has been very much on show recently: The Royal Company of Archers, which functions as the sovereign's bodyguard north of the border, played a prominent role during the United Kingdom's mourning for Queen Elizabeth II.

The landed classes looked back to the pre-modern age, to Robin Hood and the archers of Agincourt, and significantly they took up the weapon of the peasantry, emphasising the class-fraternity of our feudal past. The bow was important as a weapon in this regard because it safeguarded chivalric duty. In pre-modern warfare, war was devastating not to the peasantry, but to the nobility. The role of the peasantry was to stand on a hill and shoot arrows for the first hour of the battle and then retreat to safety. On the field itself, it was chiefly armoured nobles that were to be found. The worst a peasant might reasonably expect was the death of their lord and his replacement with another, leaving their own lives largely unchanged since feudal laws prohibited pushing them off the land. By the bow, the peasantry could unite themselves to the cause of their feudal lord without losing their privileges as essentially non-combatants. Not so in modern war, where the political classes sit in boardrooms while the lower classes are sent towards oncoming bullets.

Many 18th century Englishmen sensed that for all the talk of progress, equality, freedom, and so forth, something nasty, cold, and unthinking had possessed Europe—an intuition

that, like a great lamp uncovered, would soon shine forth in the blindingly clear oratory of Edmund Burke. The reasonable, trustworthy, just, and decent emotional response to this rebellion of one age against all antecedent ages was that of a deep-felt nostalgia, expressed in spasms of eccentricity, foremost among which was the choice of the nobility to practice the art of the longbow.

Interestingly, archery boomed in cultural importance among this class at the same time as that other curious English habit, foxhunting. Both forms of leisure seemed to capture the beauty of the pre-modern agrarian life that was so rapidly vanishing. What is especially striking is that these two sports, whilst governed by norms regarding the social statuses of their practitioners, were open equally to both sexes. Women, in fact, almost immediately dominated the archery range as they did the hunting field. (As it happens, there are two sports that seem to best magnify the elegance that is the peculiar possession of the fairer sex, those being equestrianism and archery—that observations of this kind are unfashionable make them no less true.) As the spectre of modernity spread its grey presence across old Christendom, of which women no less than men are the victims, those forgotten pleasures of our forebears—the art of the bow and the chase—became havens for those whose remaining boast was their descent from stock who rode chargers into battle so that bowmen could return to their homesteads.

For these 18th century reactionary aristocrats, there was something mysterious about running one's fingers down the painted feather fletching of an arrow as it was knocked onto the bowstring, drawing back the shaft to one's 'anchor,' looking out at the 'boss,' and that moment—eternal and yet fleeting—of complete mental-silence before the arrow soared from the corner of one's mouth at two-hundred feet per second, appearing with perfect imminence on the target. *I* know that something mysterious was deeply felt in the repetition of these shots by 18th century romantics as they united themselves to the arrow in the hope that it would carry them back to Merry England, because I too have felt it.

When one stands with a longbow in hand, a quiver full of arrows on one's back, stroking the taut string with fingers encased in a leather shooting glove, it is simply impossible to resist the storming duo of emotions that together are named *nostalgia*. At that moment,

one knows in the veiled recesses of one's heart that an ancient ceremony is about to be performed that has pleased the gods since time immemorial, for which they have kept the enemy out and food coming in.

Occasionally, I disappear to perform this ritual in secret. I put my bow and quiver in the car and drive out to some unvisited part of the surrounding countryside. I toss my portable archery target down a field, and for an hour I shoot it at various distances. (Lawyers dispute whether Englishmen are still legally required to undertake two hours of longbow practice per week, but in these excursions I may be fulfilling my civic obligations.) Standing there, surrounded by the rolling arable hills of everlasting England, for a moment I incarnate the centuries. Suddenly, this world, inhabited by so many objects that appear to come from another planet and have no place here—from the automobile to the iPhone, all of which have cruelly colonised my otherwise happy life—is a world that nonetheless becomes a home again. This mystical moment is always admixed with deep sadness, reflecting that this world has become a home only in a passing instant by my performing of a ceremony that suspends me above my epoch, and at its closing rite—with the unstringing of the bow—will send me crashing back to the technologized nightmare into which we've all sleepwalked.

"Colonel Acland and Lord Sydney: The Archers" (1769), a 236 × 180 cm oil on canvas by Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723-1792).

These two aspects of the nostalgia felt in the toxophilite ritual, the homecoming and the sorrow of the bowman, are impeccably expressed respectively in the paintings—both named *The Archers*—by Sir Joshua Reynolds and Sir Henry Raeburn. Reynolds' painting depicts two high tory aristocrats, one with an Ottoman-style horse bow and the other with a classic English longbow, illustrating that between Albion and Anatolia lay a whole civilisation—namely Christendom—conserving our link with which was the old tory cause. With all the colour and vibrance of a medieval cathedral, the noble figures reel and leap as they lose themselves in the hunt amid a sacred glade. Here, in a final English attempt at baroque excitement, *nature* and *civilisation*—contra Rousseau—appear as two aspects of a single reality, the latter being the former realised in human form.

"Robert Ferguson of Raith and Lieutenant-General Sir Ronald Ferguson: The Archers" (ca. 1789-90), a 110.5 × 123.6 cm oil on canvas by Sir Henry Raeburn (1756-1823).

Raeburn's painting, on the other hand, presents all the sorrow of a Kingdom that has ceased to be a home. Two Scottish Whigs linger together in a great blanket of beige, since any more colour would undermine the supreme puritan virtue of moderation that replaced the *agape* of true religion in these isles. These figures lurk, ghostlike, as if trapped in the frame somewhere between the realm of the living and the spiritual Hades of modernity, the earthly realisation of the latter being their whiggish mission. Raeburn's painting conveys all the misery of a lost home, and in so doing anamnestically presents the dominant emotion felt in the soul of the modern archer.

Nostalgia is the most natural set of emotions, and it is precisely because we are waging a war on human nature that we struggle to use the term in any way but negatively. And because nostalgia is so natural to us, it will always be linked to archery, the practice of which is as natural to humans as its accompanying feelings. In fact, if I were to stray into Jungian territory, I would say that archery is *archetypal*. Whether in the *eros* released by Cupid's love-arrows, or the nourishment enjoyed by the shooting of Diana's bow, or the ultimate act of self-gift in martyrdom by the arrows planted in St. Sebastian's muscles, archery reflects our most intense aspirations and needs down the centuries. Just as personal growth coincides with the exposure of our weaknesses, so our promised civilisation unfolded from the meeting of Paris's arrow with Achilles' heel. And if any further proof were needed that archery is inextricably bound up with perennial nostalgia, consider the supreme story of homecoming and sorrow, namely that of Odysseus, who reclaimed his ancestral lands by bathing them in blood spilled by his arrows.

Practiced by every civilisation as well as every primitive people, from the moment we could put a stick and string together we did so to conquer our enemies, protect our spouses, and feed our children—and every people in the world did the same thing. When one picks up a traditional bow (whether a longbow, horse bow, field-recurve, or some other type) it is as if a hidden kernel of innate knowledge, mysteriously drawn from the totality of human experience—a *gnosis* that has both anticipated and directed one's life—is freed and takes possession of oneself. The bow, we might say, is a channel by which to

receive the spirit of our ancestors.

People like me see their whole lives as a continuous struggle to claim what belonged to their ancestors, all that modernity has declared is not worth the trouble, which alone suffices to convince us that modernity is a lie. Archery, however, takes that great inheritance of which we've been robbed and retrieves it in distilled and concentrated form. And if we do not rescue our civilisational inheritance through archery, we must do so by some other means that inducts us into that civilisation in an *embodied way*, for he who fails to incarnate his inheritance in his very person never knows himself. For this reason, archery, an art that is both so universal and yet so particular, emerging everywhere on earth and yet remaining as diverse as the earth's peoples, having lost its status as a skill that was necessary for survival has continued as a discipline of self-knowledge, self-mastery, and ultimately self-giving—what the ancients called *kenosis*. It is this aspect of archery, namely its role as a pathway to interior liberty, that will be the focus of Part II.