

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Anvil* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_anvil_01.php

Hugh Kemp, "Watching the English: The Hidden Rules of English Behaviour by Kate Fox (Review Article)," *Anvil* 28.2 (2011).

Review of Fox, K. (2004). *Watching the English: The Hidden Rules of English Behaviour*. London: Hodder.

Reviewed by Hugh P. Kemp

Although published in 2004, Kate Fox's *Watching the English* is a must read for all who want (and need) to understand the English today. When about to emigrate from New Zealand to England in early 2011, they said "read Kate Fox". I found a second hand one on Amazon. I couldn't put it down.

Watching the English became the coach and mentor that eased me through the transition of the move, and also my guidebook when arrived. It confirmed some hunches: the English public service is well ... bureaucratic. Class is very much alive and well. The NHS? It's a monolithic dinosaur (and holy cow), and, dare I suggest it, some English don't realise they don't have an empire anymore (and the world has moved on, largely). These trivial notions aside, Fox taught me new things: namely, how to survive. I learned the intricate details of English space (greet my new English neighbours over the front fence, not the back), the rituals of buying rounds at the pub, rules for work, choosing schools, conflict (and how the English avoid it) and how the English do sex (not that I'll need that last one, but it was a really interesting chapter). I discovered when I arrived at my new employer – a theological college – that the library had six copies of *Watching the English* and in orientation week, students from Africa, Europe and Asia were all recommended to read it. Such is its accuracy and detail.

And readability. *Watching the English* is highly accessible with a chatty, humorous, yet convincing style. Fox is a social anthropologist, who, trained to examine the deviant and dysfunctional, decided to buck the trend, withdraw from the routine "mud-hut ethnography", and examine the normal, regular and good back in England. She delightfully explains her research technique. She spent three years 'testing' the norms of English behaviour: she jumped the queues, asked the wrong questions, broke class rules, drove the wrong car, and generally poked, prodded and annoyed her own people until a pattern emerged. This is technically called "participant observation": Fox wanted to write a "grammar" of English behaviour. She arrived at a core characteristic: the English (her own people, don't forget) are blighted with social dis-ease, a sort of a introspective awkwardness. This however is tempered by values of fair play, courtesy and modesty; it is amplified and sometimes covered by humour (a uniquely English type), moderation and various shades of hypocrisy; the general outlook on the world is empiricist (that is, factual, concrete and common sense), class conscious, and very Eeyorish.

Whether an English reader might recognise themselves is a moot point, although the English I know have admitted the book is "a good mirror for us", and that "this is probably a good thing". I have found that Fox is sort of right overall, at least as I've experienced life in England in my first year. I'm sure much has changed since 2004, and Fox reflects some of her own context (southern upper middle class England). People aren't as fussy to queue for the bus as Fox warns me to expect (but I have seen a 'queue of one'), people don't cringe and shuffle awkwardly if I make a scene (they are generally very helpful, give me what I need, frown at me, then simply ignore me).

Fox does miss a few things, although not many. I'd like to have had a deeper delve into the religious impulse of the English. The C of E is introduced, although in the context of rites of passage, class, dress codes and work and recreation rules. It didn't put me off joining my local C of E, but one that had a Kenyan vicar: we compare cultural insights periodically. Although Fox taught me some language rules and class language codes, she only glosses over two (infuriating) responses that I constantly experience. The first is "we've always done it that way". If I challenge this, the reply is inevitably "but it's better than it used to be". This I can now appreciate with a recorded history that is several millennia longer than my own country's: there's plenty of time in which to have made things "better than they used to be". This of course does not apply to the English rugby team, of which Fox is totally silent. This perhaps is understandable considering that the team has never been better than it used to be.

I've also learned the "flashy light thing" – that's what my kids call it – is very little to do with politeness on the road ("the English are such polite drivers" say my naïve New Zealand friends). There are strict rules – all implicit – about who should flash, how big the gap needs to be when you flash, and what to do when flashed at. Many an Agincourt salute has come my way for simply not understanding the "flashy light thing" on the road. And Fox is silent on that one, other than deferring to an alleged inherent desire for fairness. I suspect I'm expected to share all of the road all the time with everyone. My insurance company might want to talk to her.

Subtitled *The Hidden Rules of English Behaviour* Fox has given us not only a compendium of cultural rules (as she sees them), but also an archive of what the rules were in 2004. Much continues, but much I think is changing. And then I meet someone who has walked out of Fox's book into my life. They greet me with "A'ri?" (lit. "Are you all right?"), and I instinctively check to see if I've cut myself shaving, got all my limbs, and my fly isn't down. I still don't know what to reply, and the locals can't agree when I ask them. But I have figured out the weather, and that's really important. Or at least how to talk about the weather. When the English talk about the weather, according to Fox, it has nothing much to do with the weather at all. It's all about social dis-ease, and the need to find common things to talk about and thus hopefully enjoy some social bonding. In fact there is a lot more weather in New Zealand than England, and we too have our strange social bonding interactions around weather. It's just that, according to Fox, the interchange signals another cultural trait: the English love to moan, and have very sophisticated and unique rituals of moaning.

So this 'anthropology at home' is an anthropology of home. And home is what I hope England might become for me. The privilege of being a Kiwi in England is that I am technically an outsider: I am above and beyond class. I'll read whatever newspaper I choose, shop wherever I like, and am not above driving a Mondeo. I will stop and talk with strangers. It's easier if I have a dog with me. "Oh, you're from New Zealand", they exclaim. "You've got a beautiful country. Why ever did you come to England?", they say. Then they have a ritual moan about the weather, and I hurumph: "yes, raining again. Typical!" And now I have a new friend. Thanks Kate Fox.