

Heyck, T.W. 1998. Myths and meanings of intellectuals in twentieth-century British national identity. *Journal of British Studies* 37 (2): 192-221.

It has been wryly observed, “We British don’t take our intellectuals too seriously.”

British intellectuals are neither few nor trivial: John Locke, Adam Smith, John Stuart Mill, John Maynard Keynes. Their neglect is due to three factors: the British society viewing itself as non-intellectual, the close relation between intellectuals and the ruling elite, and the multiple meanings of the term intellectual.



George Orwell was well-known for his contempt for intellectuals, viewing them as detached from the common people and therefore un-English. In 1940 Orwell viewed them as too pessimistic and “out of step with every aspect of the essential English genius, which stands for patriotism, common sense, and distrust for totalitarianism.”



An anonymous contributor to the *Times Literary Supplement* wrote that British intellectuals are not encouraged to be as silly as the French type, but it is an ominous fact that the world is full of intellectuals of the French type."

Many important authors cite the French Revolution as an example of how different the British are from the French. “While the French broke with all their political traditions because of their unwise reliance on pure reason, the English revered tradition as the soundest guide in politics.”

**BE A GOOD
CITIZEN**

SUBMIT-CONFORM

DONT QUESTION

NEVER OBJECT

SPEND-CONSUME

FOLLOW THE RULES

WORK & PAY TAXES

OBEY ALL AUTHORITIES

HOW TO BE A *MAD* NON-CONFORMIST

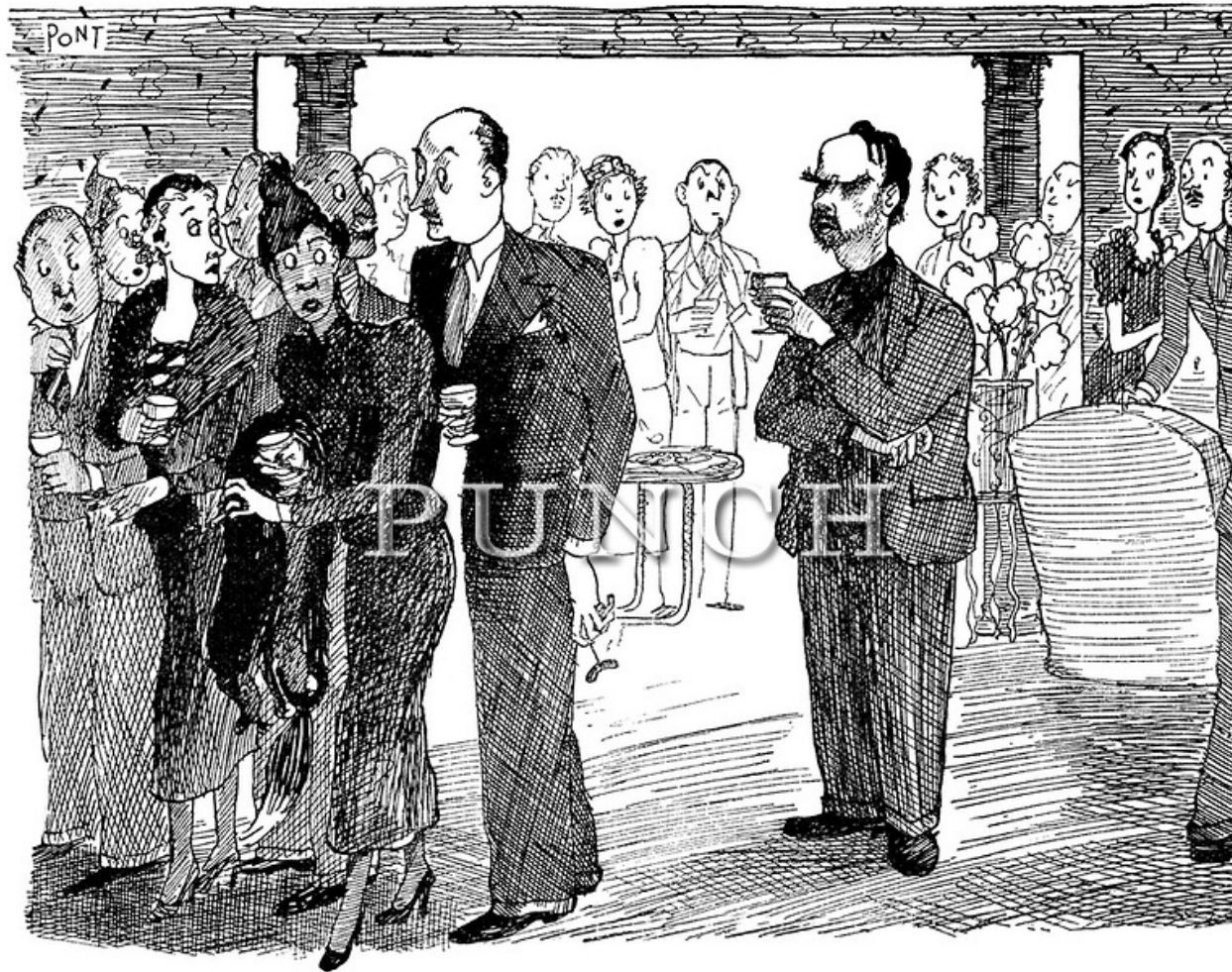


Twentieth century British/English national identity was shaped by such thoughts. In part because most of the classic writers were traditional, strongly conservative and rooted in memories of the preindustrial, rural English world.

The British are lawful and orderly, not excitable or inclined to go to extremes, and also independent, individualistic, and liberty-loving. They are highly practical, fond of whatever works, regardless of its illogical structure.... They value character more than intellect. They are not given to philosophy but to instinct, common sense, and custom

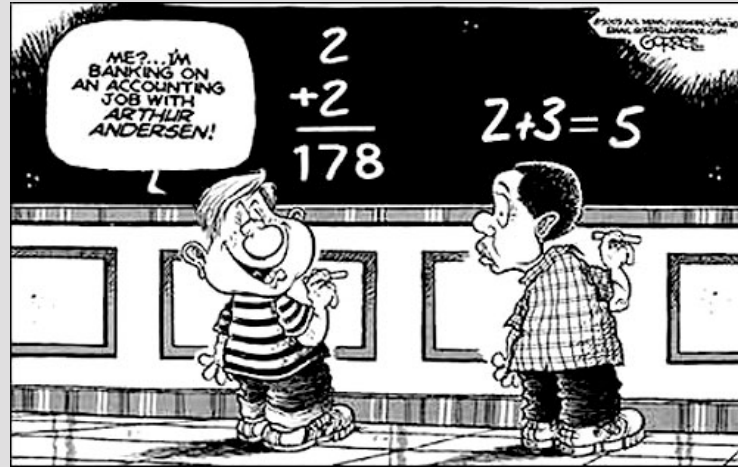
English/British intellectual have not been recognized in part because it is hard to distinguish them from the ruling elite, or “the relatively small an exclusive number of people who have ruled the country... Contrary to the myth of national identity, then, British intellectuals have been influential in shaping ideas, attitudes, and behavior”

In the late nineteenth century, the British started using the term intellectual whereas before “men of letters” or “cultivators of science” had been used. In 1910 *Encyclopedia Britannica* defined an intellectual as “a person occupied with theory and principles rather than with practice... he is aloof from the world... who cares little for ordinary pleasures.”



THE BRITISH CHARACTER
IMPORTANCE OF NOT BEING INTELLECTUAL

Another definition is one who is an independent thinker, who deals with general principles, who thinks analytically. In 1968 the BBC defined intellectuals as being regarded and usually regarding themselves as critics of society. Others have defined them as having “a speculative, critical, or changing attitude to established ideas; they are not lawyers or bureaucrats, creatures of rule or routine—that is, not mere brainworkers or professional people.”



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