



CULTURAL IDENTITY

BY DAVID LOWE

What's your name? Mary Jane.
Where do you live? Down the grid.
What number? Cucumber.
What street? Pigs Feet

This little rhyme was drummed into my head when I was a kid. It taught me to be evasive about where I came from, and prepared me for the lifelong dilemma of not knowing exactly what I am: English, British, a member of the United Kingdom, Anglo-Saxon, *ros-bif, tête d'endive*?

The British Isles is a purely geographical term for a group of islands off continental Europe, Ireland included. Great Britain, on the other hand, consists of just three countries, England, Scotland and Wales. Northern Ireland is not part of Great Britain but part of the United Kingdom (of Great Britain and Northern Ireland).

However, if you're in Belfast on a Saturday night when the pubs close and a Northern Irish man with a bellyful of Guinness claims he's British, it would be better not to contradict him. Anyway, he quite correctly puts a GB (Great Britain) sign on his car when travelling abroad, so his car is British at least. The Channel Islands are neither part of Great Britain nor of the United Kingdom. In fact, we're not quite sure what they are, or who they belong to; we just know for sure that they are not French. Inhabitants of the Channel Isles swear allegiance to the Duke of Normandy, who happens to be the Queen (of England?) thanks to William the Conqueror, who I suppose is, in a way, partly responsible for this confusion.

The Olympic Committee doesn't seem to recognize the United Kingdom, but only Great Britain, and rather confusingly includes Northern Ireland in this appellation. We mustn't be too punctilious.

If you prick us, do we not bleed?

If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die?

(The Merchant of Venice).

The Irish rugby union team is a remarkable sportive alliance that has defied generations of Protestant-

Catholic conflict, since the team is composed of both Northern and Southern Irish. There are, however, two Irish football teams, North and South. The Southern Irish team, would not call the country they represent Southern Ireland, but just Eire, which is Gaelic for Ireland. It's a bit like North and South Korea, but without nuclear bombs. Don't ever call a Southern Irishman British, even though he inhabits the British Isles, and don't call him Southern Irish either, just Irish. We don't want to start up those troubles again. Anyway as Shakespeare said,

"...a rose by any other name would smell as sweet."
(Romeo and Juliet)

According to FIFA rules, somebody with a United Kingdom passport can be selected for the England, Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland national sides. The English cricket team is officially called the England and Wales cricket team, but Scots are allowed to play.

This gets even more complicated for the national anthems. "God Save the Queen" is the official national anthem for the whole of the United Kingdom. At the start of an England-Scotland match, for example, we should really play "God Save the Queen" twice, though it's pretty stodgy played just once.

All of this runs through my head, not necessarily in this order, when I get asked the simple question: Where are you from? So I quite naturally turn not to the European Constitution, but again to Shakespeare for the answer...

O God, I could be bounded in a nutshell, and count myself a king of infinite space... *(Hamlet).*

