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Home to New England

Alfred Alcorn

Not long ago I spent two weeks tenting and tracking through the game parks of Tanzania, all the while thinking about what it means to be a New Englander. My notes on the subject are scattered among recordings of lion kills, recollections of night sounds, impressions of giraffes, descriptions of landscapes. East Africa is a tempting place: its mythic, acacia-framed vistas, its teeming wildlife, its marvelous climate, and its fascinating people stir the wanderlust. And yet, on my last day there, sitting in the terrace bar of the Norfolk Hotel in Nairobi, drinking a Tuskers, the warm sun glinting off the Landrovers and Mercedes pulled up to the curb, what filled me with nearly unbearable excitement was the prospect of getting on a plane to start the long trip back to the February snows of New England, to home.

British by birth, Anglo-Irish by descent, I find I am a New Englander to the bone, but not so much by conscious choice as by inclination and simple fate. It wasn't conscious choice because I don't think you decide to be a New Englander or a New Yorker or a southerner any more than you decide to like chamber music. Moving to Boston or reading *Yankee* magazine or eating baked beans may help. But what I'm talking about is a sense of identity that is a part of and yet distinct from being an American. It's a sense of place and people. And when you discover it in yourself, it's akin to finding that some discarded ethnic or religious tradition is in fact a rich and enriching legacy.

In my case the journey toward this identity started with the appeasement of hunger. When I arrived in this country in 1949 at the age of eight with my brother, Tony, England was still on food rationing. And even in Ireland, where we had spent a year with our grandfather, there were scarcities, at least by American standards. Whole eggs, I remember, were a luxury. In England meat was had infrequently, and then only in vague stews. Sweets were often a memory and the smell outside a bakery would make your stomach growl; when a friend ate an apple, you asked him to save you the core.

Our American foster parents, Mary and Walter Alcorn, ran a dairy and produce farm in South Chelmsford, Massachusetts. When we arrived there in early October of that year, their roadside stand was laden with pumpkins, Blue Hubbard and butternut squash, boxes of apples, and the last of the corn and tomatoes. Nature seemed out of whack; this kind of abundance was found only in storybooks and fairy tales. I vividly remember first discovering wild Concord grapes in the high pasture across the road. The vines covered a good

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part of an old stone wall, and it was with a sense of trespass that I stood there neglecting the cows I was supposed to herd home for milking and gorged myself on frost-sweetened grapes.

It wasn't just the farm and the land. We had scarcely learned how to pronounce "Massachusetts" when, gotten up like red Indians, we went trick-or-treating door to door through the village of South Chelmsford. We came home with a shopping bag half filled with Hershey bars, Welch's fudge, Mars bars, Almond Joys, Chunkies — more sweets, nearly, than was imaginable. And sometimes, on a Saturday, our parents would go shopping for groceries at the newly opened Stop & Shop supermarket in Lowell. Here there were aisles stacked with food, and you didn't need to show your ration book at the checkout.

Not long after that first Halloween debauch, we had our first Thanksgiving at the home of our new foster grandparents James and Martha Alcorn. They also owned a dairy farm in Chelmsford and celebrated that distinctly American holiday with more cooked food than I had ever seen in my life. I had seen live turkeys in Ireland, but I had never seen one roasted and stuffed and set about with dishes of whipped potatoes, creamed onions, peas, squash, gravy, cranberry sauce, and three kinds of pie — blueberry, mince, and apple.

It wasn't until later that I realized how much of the Thanksgiving fare was distinctly New England. Blueberries, for instance. There was no end to what the Alcorns did with blueberries — pies, tarts, muffins, pudding, even dumplings. They did almost as much with cranberries. I still think of cider as a New England flavor, along with codfish cakes and baked beans, clam chowder and lobster, which I first tasted in a lobster roll on trips to the seashore. But the taste that is uniquely New England to me is that of maple syrup, especially the dark, grade B variety, spilled over pancakes on a cold morning. I still marvel at the flavor, the sweet essence of the sugar maple, itself a kind of distillation of the rocky, surprisingly rich soil.

There's more, of course, to this kind of identity than food or memories of food. The time of year that we arrived probably had much to do with a lasting impression of what I realized only later was quintessentially New England. I still rake the leaves of memory of that first autumn, and even as an eight-year-old I was alive to the dry, cool air, the blue sky, and the whiteness of painted clapboard houses in that extraordinary light. England and even Ireland receded, dimmed in retrospect to damp, dreary places.

It is difficult in this kind of reconstruction to disentangle the overlapping and intertwining national and regional flavors. As I grew up in Chelmsford, I became increasingly immersed in the larger American mythos, typically that of the Old West and the cowboy hero. On Saturday nights we went to the house of our grandparents to watch the Lone Ranger on television. We listened to Roy Rogers on the radio while milking the cows. And we read Hopalong Cassidy comic books borrowed from school chums. If I had then any sense of regional identity, it was one of inferiority. Compared with Texas, for instance, Massachusetts seemed like a puny little place. Montana and Wyoming were mythic states of mind, where cowboys roamed the range to a backdrop of towering mountains. These places became poignantly real when I would go with my father to a grain dealer on Dutton Street in Lowell for bags of feed. We would unload the hundredweight sacks directly off a boxcar painted with a white mountain goat, the emblem of the Northern Pacific Railroad. Those boxcars, filled with the sweet smell of cornmeal or dairy feed, resonated for me with the snows of distant mountain ranges, with cattle ranches, bunkhouses, cowboys.

I invented my own mountains. In those days, the woods behind the farm ran unimpeded except for a few back roads all the way to Carlisle and Concord. Exploring them with my

BB gun, I pretended to be Davy Crockett, king of the old frontier, or some hero in a Zane Grey novel I had just read and reread. In winter I was Sergeant Preston of the Yukon, and Boots, our black and white border collie, was my wonder dog King. When older, I ran a line of traps and hunted, not very successfully, pheasant and partridge with a 20-gauge shotgun I had gotten for Christmas. While pretending to be somewhere else, I was coming to love, without knowing it, where I was.

Aside from new parents, we were blessed with two delightful spinster aunts, Edith and Harriet Alcorn, who lived with James and Martha on the Hunt Road farm. They plied us with nature books and Audubon posters. I remember the excitement of being able to match the real bluebirds that nested in the old orchard with the illustration in the book or with the dusty specimen mounted in a case of stuffed birds at McFarland grammar school. They also took us on sightseeing trips all over the region — Gloucester, New Hampshire, the lower reaches of the Maine coast, the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard, Sturbridge Village, the John Greenleaf Whittier House. Without realizing it, we were imbibing through them the myths and culture of the region.

There were more local explorations as well. As members of the 4-H Club we traveled all over Middlesex County to the farms of other members. Most of these places, like our own, were struggling concerns kept going by gnarled old New Englanders. We had to prepare our heifers for fairs, teaching them show-ring decorum with special halters, keeping them clean, even washing the Holsteins with fabric blueing to remove stains from the white patches of their coats. If I have any regrets about what has happened to the region, it's that, like our own, many of those farms are gone, and with them a way of life, a set of values that we seem to need nowadays more than ever.

This rural, Yankee aspect of being a New Englander faded somewhat when I went to high school at Keith Academy in Lowell. Keith, a Catholic day school that was housed in what had been the city jail on Thorndike Street, showed me another aspect of New England — the Catholic, ethnic New England of the mill cities like Lowell. I gave up my purebred Brown Swiss for football practice, Latin declensions, and girls. I did better at football — I am still proud of the 5.5 yards per carry I averaged as a halfback my junior year — than I did at Latin. And it was feast or famine where the girls were concerned. Like Kerouac I had my Maggie Cassidy and, later, long, beer-soaked weekends at Hampton Beach. High school both widened and narrowed my perspective. My Latin book had wonderful pictures of life in ancient Rome, and in English we read Jane Austen, Thomas Hardy, Dostoevsky, Shakespeare. But there was something defensive and defeatist about the school beyond the poor showing of its football team. It may have been that old-fashioned Catholicism was on the decline, but I think it had something to do with Lowell, which in those days was palpably shabbier than it is today, its slums more obvious and the South Common newly despoiled with a hideous yellow-brick housing project. I remember feeling that Lowell was surely among the armpits of the nation, that nothing had ever happened or would ever happen there. If anything, Lowell reinforced my boyhood sense that New England was a small, stagnant backwater.

It wasn't until I entered Harvard that this sense of regional inferiority shifted to something more positive. Harvard breathes history. My freshman dorm was Massachusetts Hall, where Washington had quartered troops in the War of Independence. Teddy Roosevelt's trophy heads festooned the Freshman Union, where we took our meals. And John F. Kennedy, as president-elect, drove into the Yard that December to attend a meeting of the Board of Overseers. (In fact, as he walked back to his car, a large crowd broke through police lines and forced him to take refuge in the suite connected to mine in Mas-

sachusetts Hall.) Portraits everywhere stared out of the past, and I am still haunted by the white marble plaques in Memorial Hall commemorating Harvard's Union dead in the Civil War.

But that was Harvard, and I didn't quite connect the institution to the region until I took Thomas Fleming's course on the intellectual history of America. It was the one offering at Harvard of which I attended every lecture. Fleming would start right under our noses, in Mount Auburn Cemetery or some such place, and end up with the National Park System or the architecture of Chicago. I came to realize that Lowell, far from being merely a rundown mill town on the banks of the Merrimack, was in fact a gem of early municipal design and the birthplace of America's industrialization. It dawned on me that I had grown up in an area rich in history of national and even international significance. The War of Independence began in Lexington, where Aunt Edith taught school, and my father had pastured dry stock for a dollar a week in the Lindsay Pond section of Concord, where, I like to imagine, Emerson and Thoreau had walked. I didn't become anything like a regional chauvinist, but I began to understand in a quiet way how much of the nation, for better or worse, was shaped by New Englanders.

This sense of region was reinforced when, after a year off from Harvard, I took a few weeks during the summer to hitch around the country. America is a marvelously various place, and in seeing the distinctiveness of, say, Minnesota or Colorado, I began to appreciate what made New England special. And then there was the reaction when I told people where I was from. "Boston!" someone in Missouri or Colorado would exclaim, as though that city was its own rich myth. And yet it remained, like the small towns of Wisconsin or Grand Forks, North Dakota, or Salt Lake City, certifiably American.

In my senior year at Harvard I married Sally Remick, who comes from an old New England family of shipbuilders. I didn't marry her for her pedigree, but I confess to having been charmed by her father's house in Chelmsford. Built in 1690, the house has the low ceilings of that time, especially in the kitchen, where you can reach up and touch the hand-adzed ten-by-ten beams supporting the floor above. It's a little like touching history itself, the vernacular history of a simple, hardworking, and yet cannily sophisticated people. An antiquarian, Eliot W. Remick had among his collections some gears and other bits of colonial machinery that had been precisely carved from the very hardest wood. The resourceful colonists had resorted to wood because iron, over which the British maintained a manufacturing monopoly, was too expensive.

For all that, we didn't settle in New England but took off immediately after graduation for Montgomery, Alabama, where I was to work as a reporter on the *Alabama Journal*, the city's afternoon daily. I needed a job and, more to the point, I needed to learn a trade. While a senior at Harvard, I had met Ray Jenkins, the *Journal's* city editor, who was in Cambridge as a Nieman fellow. Over a few beers one afternoon in the King's Mens Bar on Boylston Street, he offered me a job as a reporter.

The South certainly proved different from New England. The heat alone in those first few summer weeks was like a solid medium you walked into every time you stepped outside. All the clichés pertained — the heat, the slower pace, the easy friendliness, the courtliness of the planter class, the separation and miserable condition of the blacks, and a good old boy bravado that then seemed utterly foreign to the understated Yankee character. What was really different in the South, though, was a sense of violence, of things always being close to the edge. As a reporter I covered Recorder's Court in Montgomery every Monday morning, and after a hot weekend in July the carnage could be astounding. Arraignments went forth for murder, rape, robbery, and deadly mayhem. Characters

showed up all bandaged after a shoot-out with the cops to tell their side of the story. I remember dropping in on one upcountry autopsy where the accused, a handcuffed good old boy, was watching the coroner dig through the kidneys of his best friend looking for the bullet that had killed him. They had been drinking and had gotten into a fight. All of this was routine, quite aside from the larger conflict revolving around civil rights.

What struck me about the civil rights struggle was the normality of it. Given the condition under which blacks lived in the South, it seemed only natural to me that they would revolt. They couldn't vote, their schools were farcical, and the roads in the black sections of Montgomery had never been paved. Worse than that, they constituted a kind of shadow people that in every sense didn't count. The wonder to me was that the revolt hadn't started much earlier.

After two years and one daughter in Montgomery, we moved back North. My parents were ill, and on a quick visit to Boston to see them I had lined up a position as editorial writer on the *Herald-American*. Sally and I both missed New England.

Yet I don't remember that we particularly enjoyed Boston and New England after we returned. It may have been the "New Boston" going up all around to the sound of jackhammers, or the way the whole region seemed to be turning into shopping centers and house lots, including the farm in South Chelmsford, which my parents sold. It may have been that I found editorial writing tiresome, especially at WEEL, where I worked after leaving the *Herald*. And it may have been Vietnam and my own failure to either protest or join that war. It may have been the death of my foster parents. In any event, we decided in 1971 to move to Ireland. We had spent a summer there in 1969, and when I came into a small legacy, it was with a sense of escape that we moved to the Republic, settling first in Dun Laoghaire, just south of Dublin, before moving on to County Wicklow, to an old stone farmhouse nestled in a glen.

The countryside all around us was spectacular. From the front windows of our narrow old house we looked out onto the rising pastures hedged with rows of two-hundred-year-old beech trees. Just up the road on a clear day we could make out the mountains of Wales across the Irish Sea. We were twenty miles from Dublin's pubs and theaters. On trips to the midlands to visit the farm where Tony and I had lived with our grandfather, the memories were all but palpable. From voices to bird calls to the smell of peat smoke, it was like finding one's past still whole, still intact.

Indeed, I had decided I could revert, could become, as I were, an Irishman. I still technically qualified as an Irish citizen. I had a taste for Guinness and Bushmills. I could, I thought, even sound like an Irishman. It wasn't to be. Despite all my posturing, my cloth hat, my attempts at Gaelic, my blackthorn stick, I remained, in their eyes anyway, a Yank. It didn't make any difference that we had a house there, that we made friends up and down the social scale, from the local cottages to some of the castles, that our two children, Margaret and Sarah, attended a local school. We remained, officially and unofficially, resident aliens. I remember driving Margaret and Sarah to school in the predawn darkness of winter. On the way we would pick up a neighbor's child. In the back of the car Margaret and Sarah and their friend, Hilary Johnston, would rehearse for each other a story in Gaelic that they had to memorize for class that day. Hearing my daughters speak this wonderful, incomprehensible language in a County Wicklow accent made me realize that they, not I, were the ones becoming Irish.

We stayed nearly four years before moving back to Massachusetts. They were years rich in friends, memories, events. The ostensible reason for leaving was that we had run out of money. But we were connected enough then around Dublin to have gotten jobs and stayed.

Sally had started the first consumer column in the *Irish Times*, and by then I could have come up with some sort of remunerative competence.

Being broke turned out to be the pretext for returning. Both of us missed New England. We had family, friends, and memories here as well. At one level it meant returning to all those things that, at a distance, excite the exile's fancy — the glories of October, sailing off the Maine coast, the forests of New Hampshire, Boston politics, real winter, Tanglewood, Harvard Square, the Harvard-Yale game, dawn on Plum Island, the Red Sox, good pizza — those myriad abstract and concrete things that you so readily take for granted once back for a while.

But another dynamic had started to work as well. I had been, for the past four years, writing fiction. My first effort, a novelistic fantasy about Ireland in the Myles na Gopaleen mode, is best left buried behind the barn. More seriously, I found I wanted to write about New England, about the farm, the land, and the people. While discovering one past in Ireland, I knew I was losing another in this country.

Since returning I have written four novels, two of which, *The Pull of the Earth* and *Vestments*, have been published. All have been set in New England. My current effort, *Home Ground*, what I would call a meditation on place, is set in Ireland; but its real locus in some ways is New England. It's apparent, I think, that much of my writing is an attempt to reclaim not only the New England of the present but the New England of the past, that rich lode memory and imagination, that place, as much as any house or street address, I call home. 🍷