

# Bill the Conqueror

by Matthew Engel

1 **E**very time I hear the name Bill Bryson, I remember the story of the Athenian who announced his hatred of the great statesman Aristides the Just. Asked whether Aristides had wronged him in any way, he said not. "I don't even know him. I'm just sick of him always being called 'the Just'."

2 Literary life being suffused with mutual jealousies, imagine how much worse it is for those of us who have ever attempted to write vaguely humorous books about Britain in Bryson's wake. His new travel book was only published on Thursday and it has probably already overtaken everyone else's sales on the subject put together. I have personal evidence that Bill is not merely the Just but also the Generous and Thoughtful. That doesn't make it any easier to cope.

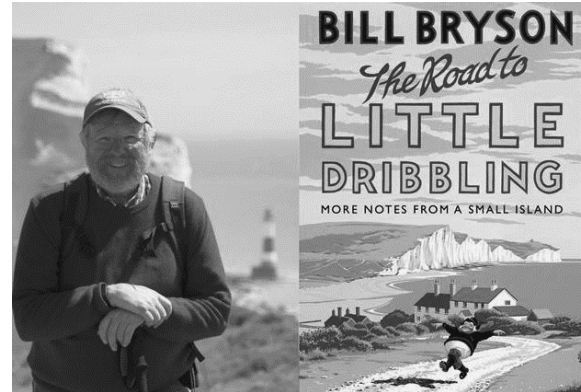
3 On this occasion, however, there are already some signs of a backlash. *The Daily Mail*, an often grumpy newspaper, commissioned a grumpy writer to write a grumpy column complaining that Bryson's new book on Britain was grumpy. Which is weird as well as being rather Brysonesque: good-natured grumpiness has always been central to the Bryson shtick.

4 Travel-writing was once dominated by the adventurous and/or erudite. Bryson did more than anyone to reinvigorate and democratise the genre. He would potter around, get diverted by quirky stories, and make sharp observations and very funny jokes. It was his original British book, *Notes from a Small Island*, that propelled him to superstardom in the late 1990s.

5 In his non-travel books he has been a brilliant explainer of science, history and language, an extension of his travel-writing persona as the knowing outsider. As an uprooted inhabitant of Iowa living in England, he was matchless at pointing up the little differences between here and there, explaining each side of the pond to the other. He was impish and often rude, but always affectionate.

6 The years have passed. He is older, of course, and has added to his repertoire regular jokes about his own dottiness: getting bashed on the head by a car park barrier makes a dramatic starting point. He is also now officially British: his description of the citizenship test forms is one of the funniest passages in *Little Dribbling*.

7 And time has brought him much honour: president of the Campaign to Protect Rural England; chancellor of Durham University. Brilliant at both, apparently. Now he is British, the deserved knighthood cannot be far away. This may not, however, be compatible with life as a subversive humorist. (I commend to him Alan Bennett turning down life as Sir Alan: "It would be like wearing a suit every



day.") Subversion has already become more difficult. He can no longer react with delighted astonishment to the little oddities of British life: he knows them too well.

8 His journey is slightly confusing. He is not heading to Little Dribbling, which sounds like it might exist – probably in Norfolk, close to Great Snoring – but doesn't, even in his text. Instead he sets out along the Bryson Line, his reckoning of the longest straight line possible on the map of Britain, from Bognor Regis in the south to Cape Wrath in the north.

9 But then he mostly ignores his own line, and indeed he races through the top third of the map, known as Scotland, in just 13 pages. (Well, you know the Scots, they won't mind; very easy-going at the moment, no sense of self-importance or anything.) A pity: I would have liked much more of Bryson's take on modern Scottishness.

10 In truth, though, the joy of his book comes less from his excursions than his discursions: his potted stories and his reminiscences. It is at its best as the history of a love affair, the very special relationship between Bryson and Britain. We remain lucky to have him.

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