Nature notes

Pink-footed geese at a view point fill the skies in some places in Scotland and Ireland, where they nested on cliff ledges to avoid the attentions of arctic foxes. They will settle here for the winter on lochs and estuaries, with many coming down the east coast as far as Norfolk. Pink-feet are relatively small geese; pinkish-brown with a darker head. They fly in large flocks, sometimes V-shaped, making high-pitched “wink, wink” calls. At this time they turn into a mighty roar. They feed on discarded potatoes and sugar beet. If they rise up in alarm all together, their wings make an equally gigantic roar.

Jardine Matheson, 79; racer, Olympic gold medallist (2010), 35.

Nature notes

Birthdays today


Racing Nowhere

Ethnic prejudice in the United Kingdom has changed but may not have declined

Is Britain still a racist country? The latest data from the social research institute NatCen shows an ever increasing acceptance in many expected liberal directions. The number of people who say that same-sex relationships are “not wrong at all”, for example, has risen steadily for many years. Yet, when it comes to racism, something odd is happening. When people were asked whether they, personally, were racially prejudiced, figures show no consistent decline.

At the turn of the millennium, admittedly after a drop since the 1980s, 25 per cent of people considered themselves prejudiced. Earlier this year, 26 per cent of people said so. In the interim it has been as high as 38 per cent, but never lower than it was 17 years ago. “Given that racial prejudice is not generally perceived as a positive characteristic,” the report notes, “there is good reason to assume that the actual proportion of the British public who are racially prejudiced may be higher.”

There is an optimistic temptation to assume that a degree of liberal self-flagellation is occurring here, with some describing themselves as prejudiced as a progressive acknowledgement of their own failings. This would mean that those most likely to call themselves prejudiced are, in fact, the least likely to do so. The data, alas, does not bear this out. NatCen found that being black or Asian, or of African-Caribbean origin, was an even stronger predictor of Leave in the EU referendum made respondents more likely to self-identify as prejudiced, and such groups do not tend towards liberal self-flagellation. A survey in 2014 found considerable proportions believing that “some races or ethnic groups are born less intelligent” (18 per cent) and “some races or ethnic groups are born working harder” (44 per cent). If these are not racist views, then the word “racism” has no meaning at all.

Few could call Britain a racial utopia, with ethnic minorities still under-represented in boardrooms and professions and over-represented in statistics of disadvantage and the criminal justice system. Yet a generation ago, racist taunts were common place in playgrounds and often unacted upon; today they could be grounds for expulsion and front-page newspaper stories. In 2002, when asked whether they would support the idea of a new party leader due to be announced at the UK Independence Party annual conference opens in Torquay, Devon, with the new party leader to be announced today; the Office for National Statistics reported that one in ten couples are standard elsewhere in the industry. Many are captains who give newcomers vital training. Shortcuts on training are never acceptable and cancelled flights are better than unsafe ones, but there is no such thing as an airline that is too big or too cheap to play by the rules.

Distinctly Unimpressive

Britain’s official press regulator is becoming a national joke

The press is powerful. With power comes responsibility, and the public has a right to know that there is a fair and independent mechanism for sanctioning the press when things go wrong. The Press Complaints Commission fulfills this role in the UK. The Press Complaints Commission is the basic rationale for press regulation, which is otherwise close to being a contradiction in terms. To do its job the press must be free, and press freedom includes, of course, the freedom to offend and express a point of view. Any plausible press regulator should not just understand this but make the case vigorously and often. Long before it would have been the opposite, which is unfortunate because he is chief executive of Impress, Britain’s only “official” press regulator. In an extraordinary and profane series of tweets and retweets last year Mr Heawood, a former Impress director, accused the agency’s chief executive, Andrew Haines, of promoting the word “picaninnies” to describe Africans with “watermelon smiles” in a newspaper column. It feels unthinkable that a member of parliament could have written such a thing, and unlikely that any newspaper would publish it. Television, music, cinema, and sport are more diverse. In 2014 the Office for National Statistics reported that one in ten couples are inter-ethnic. Has none of it affected attitudes at all?

This seems hard to swallow. Possibly our understanding of prejudice itself could use a little updating. In 2013, when the question was last asked, 50 and 46 per cent of people, respectively, believed that “most white Britons” would “mind a lot” if a close relative married somebody Asian or black. Thirty years earlier those figures were 77 per cent and 79 per cent. Yet also in 2013, 70 per cent of people believed that the same group would “mind a lot” a close relative marrying a Muslim.

Britain thinks of itself as a nation in which tolerance and liberalism are forever marching forwards. In some respects this is true, and perhaps in a manner which these striking figures only poorly reflect. They should be jolted, even so, from our complacency. We are not yet who we ought to be.

On this day

In 1979 Pope John Paul II arrived in Ireland for having built his company from the small beginnings in his native Italy. He is now more than 4,000 pilots and estimated profits this year; the Office for National Statistics reported that one in ten couples are standard elsewhere in the industry. Many are captains who give newcomers vital training. Shortcuts on training are never acceptable and cancelled flights are better than unsafe ones, but there is no such thing as an airline that is too big or too cheap to play by the rules. The airline claims that the root of its crisis is pilots’ holiday timetabling. In reality it is losing flight crew for lack of full-time contracts that are standard elsewhere in the industry. Many are captains who give newcomers vital training. Shortcuts on training are never acceptable and cancelled flights are better than unsafe ones, but there is no such thing as an airline that is too big or too cheap to play by the rules.

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“Next to the originator of a good sentence is the first quoter of it.” — Ralph Waldo Emerson, poet. From an essay, “Puritan and Poet,” Letters and Social Aims (1876).