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Robert Tombs and Isabelle Tombs, *That Sweet Enemy: The French and the British From the Sun King to the Present*, New York: Knopf, 2007. 816 pp. \$40.00 (US). ISBN-10: 1400040248.

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This is no ordinary treatment of diplomatic relations between two historical rivals, however welcome such a book might be. It is rather a joint history of two nations whose histories, to a remarkable degree, and despite their historic rivalry, are interconnected in myriad and remarkable ways. France and England have not only fought and influenced one another; they have defined themselves against each other. For the Tombs, and it should be said at the outset that he is British and she French while both are accomplished historians, French-English relations have been special, like no other two countries anywhere on the planet. For the British the French are the quintessential foreigners, closest to England geographically and culturally, yet stubbornly refusing to show the good sense of being like the English. In fact, each nation historically has seen the other in terms of mutually reinforcing and opposing stereotypes that both accept. These are summed up in the images of John Bull versus Marianne, masculine versus feminine if one wills: the British are industrialists and financiers as opposed to the French who are purveyors of food and fashion, they are manufacturers of wool as opposed to silk, pursuers of profit and greed (a nation of shopkeepers) versus nationalist values and *élan vitale*, the British have a penchant for fact as opposed to theory, are Anglos versus Romans, Protestants versus Catholics, repressed puritans versus hedonists, advocates of domesticity as opposed to sociability, and prefer humor to wit—the list is endless.

Yet despite all this (much of it, of course, hyperbole), the French and the English, according to the Tombs, are more like each other than any other two nationalities, they are virtual “twins” today in terms of size (sixty millions), economic wealth, and national values, and individually they resemble each other more than the British do the Americans or the French the Germans. It is not an accident that twice in their history, in 1940 and in 1956, both have at least entertained proposals that they actually merge, that all Britons be citizens of the Republic while all Frenchmen become subjects of the monarchy. And if these ideas were rejected as utopian, both nations have seemed to understand during the twentieth century, roughly coterminous with their *entente cordiale*, that they must remain allies of one another, even if they stubbornly have refused to see that their cooperation rather than continued inane peacetime rivalry is essential to the health of Europe and the world.

The book falls naturally into three parts: the “Hundred Years War” of the eighteenth-century, the relative peace of the nineteenth century, and the Entente Cordiale of the twentieth century. One can easily lose from sight how much the historic military rivalry between Britain and France in the eighteenth century from 1689 to 1815 shaped the modern world. The struggle began with Britain opposing Louis XIV in his quest to conquer the Low Countries, a staple of British policy that was to make permanent allies of the two in the twentieth century when it was the Germans’ turn to attempt their conquest of the same area. Britain became the mainstay of the anti-French coalition that blocked the ambitions of Louis XIV, and won a historic battle at Blenheim in 1704 that with Agincourt, Trafalgar, and Waterloo, all came to signal patriotic events in English history, and demonstrate the extent to which the British-French rivalry has shaped their mutually opposing images of the other. The British succeeded in blocking the French from conquering Germany or merging the crowns of France

and Spain; they would not accept French hegemony on the continent under the Bourbons as they would not accept it under Napoleon or Hitler.

Between the historic and epic struggles that opened and closed this long, intermittent conflict, the British fought the French again from 1740-48, 1756-63, and 1776-83. Both nations were trading nations in pursuit of world empire, and their struggles involved military engagements of world-wide dimensions fought on the American and Asian continents, resulting in the British loss of North America and the French loss of their foothold in India. With the Napoleonic wars the casualties counted in the millions. Nor did the two powers shape the world only by their fighting. They together, with the help of the Dutch and other small powers, transported six million Africans to the New World to work as slaves, the British accounting for over 50 percent of the slave trade and the French for a good chunk of the remainder, while the miserable French sugar islands were the largest buyers. And the French made possible the American Revolution at great cost to themselves; the debts contracted during that adventure were the precipitating cause of the great Revolution in France.

The most remarkable thing is that during this conflict the pattern of mutual admiration of British and French intellectuals became established. During the Enlightenment the cultural interactions were numerous; Newton and Locke swept France, popularized by Voltaire, while Montesquieu and Rousseau were widely read in England. David Hume brought Rousseau to England where he stayed for over a year, and Adam Smith was heavily influenced by the French Physiocrats. The French stubbornly refused to accept Smith's arguments nevertheless and still do not today. Shakespeare became the symbol of British literature for the French even if Voltaire thought him crude and criticized his refusal to obey the rules of classical drama, and the French consumed novels such as *Pamela*, *Clarissa*, and *Tom Jones*. And the French Revolution, of course, stimulated the classical modern definition of conservatism in the writings of Edmund Burke.

One could go on in this vein too, and the Tombs do so. It remains difficult to contemplate, however, that despite this cultural interconnectedness Napoleon was resolved to "exterminate" England, although it is not clear what he meant by that. Trafalgar, like the Armada in an earlier century, and the Battle of Britain in a later one, saved the British from invasion. In frustration Napoleon turned to efforts to crush the British through a continental blockade, an effort that led him to invade Russia and exhaust his armies in the fruitless attempt at its conquest. But he had already foolishly tried to impose his brother Joseph on the Spanish as their king, an effort that led to the origins, in fact and etymologically, to *guerrilla* warfare. The Tombs are particularly interesting in showing how Wellington masterfully used the Spanish uprising to bleed and weaken the French, helping to bring about their defeat. The Tombs agree that British and French identities were forged during the second hundred years' war. They permit themselves some disagreement over the ultimate responsibility for the carnage that resulted. For Isabel Tombs it was British aggression, Francophobia, hysterical anti-Catholicism, and the relentless quest for global capitalist empire that fueled the opposition to the French. Robert Tombs notes that the century opened and closed with French attempts at hegemony in Europe and through the continent the world, and where Isabel sees democratic revolution in France running into conservative Britain as defender of the old order, Robert Tombs notes that the British did not see democracy in France but rather nationalist dictatorship. They may both be right of course. But their common view of the French Revolution is pure François Furet, it was a political process the issue of which, if not necessary totalitarianism, was certainly world war. The dynamism of 18th century capitalism they acknowledge, but its accompaniment, the rise of the bourgeoisie and the quest of a newly empowered class for political expression, for them apparently is the historiography of a now defunct era.

The nineteenth century witnessed a transformation from a continent threatened by French hegemony to one in thrall to the Germans. The British did not see this coming; they despised Napoleon III and his adventures and thought the French had their defeat in the Franco-Prussian war coming to them. When they finally entered into entente with the French in 1904 it was too late: the war clouds were already

forming and the balance of power had shifted. There were those who at the time who on racist grounds saw greater British affinity with the Germans than the French, a challenge it seems to me to the Tombs thesis; it was the recklessness of German policy, including an entirely unnecessary naval arms race with the British, that pushed the latter into the arms of the French and the Russians. But while noting the new imperialism and vast empires that the British and French accumulated in the 19th century, the Tombs fail to note that the Germans were latecomers to the process and found most of the planet already taken when they appeared on the scene. That the two World Wars were imperial conflicts between the haves and have-nots—and that the British and French were now the haves—drew Lenin's attention but seems to have escaped the Tombs.

One of the most attractive features of the book is the use of frequent asides that show the continued importance and mutual influences the British and French continued to exercise on one another. Through these we learn that the Englishman John Worth, dressmaker to the Empress Eugénie, created the French fashion industry, while a lesser known English beauty, Cora Pearl, came to epitomize the Parisian world of *haute mondaine* courtesans. The British taught the French sportsmanship, exporting soccer, rugby and boxing, while the French reciprocated with cycling. Britain was the home during the nineteenth century of French political exiles; in the first half of the century these included future kings and Prime Ministers, Guizot and Louis Philippe, in the later half of the century members of the Paris Commune took refuge in England, two of whom married daughters of Karl Marx. Yet it was the Third Republic that really enjoyed the greater freedom and tolerance in the nineteenth century, and if Emile Zola had to flee to Britain to escape wrongful prosecution during the Dreyfus case, Oscar Wilde had to take refuge in Paris. The British were in the process of defining "homosexuality" and excluding it as unacceptable behavior.

Five million British soldiers fought in France during the First World War and over a million died there. For all that the two nations seem to have experienced the war in comparative isolation from one another, despite a joint military command at the end and the early initiative of a youthful Jean Monnet to join together their war economies. At the war's end the most Anglophile politician in French history was in command of France, Georges Clemenceau, yet he too learned the lesson of "perfidious Albion:" Lloyd George was happy to issue a British guarantee of French security against Germany if the French would agree not to annex the German Rhineland, but the arrangement was contingent on American agreement. When the American Senate refused to ratify the Versailles treaty the guarantee fell apart, the British using the American refusal to withdraw their own offer. The French were left holding the bag, and to add insult to injury, a Brit, John Maynard Keynes, convinced a naïve Anglo-Saxon world that the Versailles treaty was rapacious revenge and unenforceable, neither of which, for the Tombs, were true. Indeed, their indictment of British policy between the wars, which blithely ignored French concerns and unilaterally forced a compliant and faintly cowardly France down a joint road of appeasement, is one of the strong points of the book. On the other hand their assumption that British-French cooperation could have prevented the Second World War appears implausible.

Readers will also enjoy the Tombs' dramatic rendering of the high point in intimacy between the two countries during the Second World War and their comparison of two "men of destiny," Churchill and de Gaulle. Both played with the idea of fusing their countries in the hours of dire French need, Churchill in the hope of preventing France from negotiating an armistice, de Gaulle in the hope of extracting maximum effort from the British to prevent France's fall. Neither was successful: the French asked for armistice and the British would not commit the Royal Air Force to the defense of France. In fact neither could prevent the occurrence of incidents that still rankle today: the French "heroic" retreat at Dunkirk first saw the English soldiers being removed while the French held the perimeter to permit their escape; only subsequently did Churchill realize that he needed to pull the French troops out of the German trap with the British. The French fought on, after the defeat in Belgium, often heroically, at the Somme, taking 50,000 casualties, while Churchill denied them air support. And then, failing to get a commitment about the disposition of the French fleet during the armistice, the British attacked it at

Mers-el-Kebir.

With all this Churchill made the fortunes of de Gaulle and the Free French, turning the BBC over to the General on the night of June 18, and London became the capital of Free France. To be sure Churchill became frustrated with de Gaulle, threatening to abandon him when Roosevelt showed preference for General Giraud. He would not be forced to choose between France and America, Churchill warned de Gaulle, if he was so forced he would always chose America. De Gaulle was not told of either the North African landings or the Normandy invasion prior to their occurrence. On the other hand, when Churchill seemed ready to abandon the General the British cabinet would not; the entire British political elite during the war saw the necessity of a strong France for the postwar and the future of Europe. It was clear in Britain, moreover, if not in Washington, that the French Resistance would declare for de Gaulle. The British Special Operations Executive armed the French Resistance, and dropped many special French-speaking agents behind the lines in France to assist in escape routes for downed airmen and sabotage of German defenses; these were especially effective during the Normandy invasion, after which a triumphant British army swept through Northern France on its way into Germany. The British finished the war with great popularity in France despite the crises between the two nations at the war's outset.

The Tombs appear to especially regret the absence of postwar cooperation between the two nations; yet they see the divergence in their policies as to some extent dictated by history. As in the eighteenth century, British capitalism to centuries later was globally oriented; the Commonwealth accounted for 90 percent of British external trade in 1948, and the intimacy with America seemed the guarantee of British power, inuring it from the necessity of joining with the six in the Common Market, which was, after all, a club of losers. France on the other hand perceived that Europe alone offered the means of projecting French power on a world scale. This divergence has determined the nature of the struggle between the two nations through the postwar and the end of the cold war. The British think globally, the French in terms of Europe and the Mediterranean, and the French are as allergic to America as the British are to Europe.

There is irony in this. During the Suez crisis of 1956 an Anglophile Guy Mollet and Francophile Anthony Eden saw an identity of interests in standing up to the designs of the Egyptian dictator Gamal Abdul Nasser, whom both they rather foolishly compared to Hitler. Both were prompted, by the temporary confluence of their interests in resisting the tide of decolonization, to discuss once again, a proposal by Mollet for a Franco-British union. But the crisis finished badly. There was a consensus in France about forcing regime change in Egypt, which it was thought would enable the French to put down the Algerian rebellion. But the British were divided over the wisdom of the attack, and when the Americans opposed it they buckled and halted operations; the French, who had impetuously put their forces under British command, were forced to do likewise. The two countries drew opposing conclusions from the crisis. The British resolved never to separate from Washington, which they hoped to influence from a position of loyal friendship. The French threw their lot in with the Germans and the forging of a strong Europe, eventually, they hoped, to function as a counterweight to American power.

The divergence appeared again during the Iraq crisis, and the Tombs admire the policies of neither Chirac nor Blair. The former is indicted in their account of pandering to the Iraqis in the hope of gaining access to weapons markets and oil contracts, while the latter disingenuously exaggerated the issue of weapons of mass destruction while deciding alone, with only a narrow clique of advisers, to go along loyally with the reckless American plans for regime change. Both continue to pursue failed policies, the Tombs appear to be saying, in opposition to one another, while success can come only from their cooperation. The British remain tied to Washington; complicating the issue is the convergence of British and American economic policies since Thatcher and Reagan, based on the free market and globalization, while the French continue to look to Europe and fiercely defend their "social model" of the welfare state, even at the price of slower growth and higher unemployment. But the European Union,

enlarged with the enthusiastic support of the British, has moved away from the French vision of providing a counter-weight to Washington, while the British policy of reliance on Washington in the pursuit of globalization has equally led to disaster in Iraq and the Middle East. During the controversy over the European constitution, the French turned against it because it seemed to incarnate the British-American model of neo-liberalism while the British shunned it because it appeared to them to represent the French social model.

Yet the two countries do not diverge that much. Blair has strengthened the British welfare system while Chirac chipped away at the French welfare state. Meanwhile the British middle class has discovered the charms of France, stimulated by the “Chunnel.” Peter Mayle writes books about the glories of living in Provence, stimulating an invasion of British and American tourists who proceed to ruin the charm of which he writes. The British own 600,000 homes in the French countryside, we are told. The British and the French remain more alike than citizens of any other countries; they must coordinate their policies. But how? For Isabel Tombs it is clear that the British must throw in their lot with a united Europe. Robert Tombs notes the continued French suspicion of globalization and preference for a policy based on unity with the Germans and a tightly-knit “deeper” Europe and an associated Mediterranean region that can one day provide a counter-weight to Washington. The issue is not easily resolved.

But need it be? After all this one may still question the basic assumption of a brilliant book. The Tombs could have started their history earlier; with the Norman Conquest, and the first hundred years’ war. When I first entered French class in high school I learned that French was the official language of the British court for 200 years. English is itself a blend of French and Anglo-Saxon. But France and Germany, too, came under one sovereign in Carolingian times; why should their cooperation be any less essential to the health of Europe than the British-French tie? Both the French and the Germans are busily learning English, not each other’s language, and the Germans seem to do better in this regard, although I admit that all my evidence for this is anecdotal. But even if the French and Germans talk to each other in English, and English becomes the predominant language in the European Union, the Franco-German tie seems today the best bet for the future of Europe. It is true that only the British and French today maintain an independent military capacity based on nuclear weapons; if Europe is to become a military force comparable in any sense to America it will require Franco-British cooperation.

At key moments both the British and the French have understood this. But the British-American intimacy, based on a common language and traditions, has seemed consistently to trump the British-French or American-French relationship, and the real fusion of cultures is between Britain and America. By default every American publisher has an office in London and every British publisher an office in New York. The Tombs admit in the end that six of ten Britons cannot name a French person of note beyond the President of France; this probably remains as true for Sarkozy as it was for Chirac, who is now likely to be quickly forgotten. Yet to watch the BBC news is to almost to watch the American networks, the coverage of America remains thorough, and I will wager most Britons, and French for that matter, are following the American presidential sweepstakes with the same fascination and interest they show for their own politics. The case for a special French-British intimacy remains to be made. But the Tombs have produced a brilliant book, and a good read to boot, despite its 700 pages.

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