

INTRODUCTORY NOTE: Barbara Ehrenreich (b. 1941) graduated from Reed College and received her Ph.D. from Rockefeller University. Her commentaries on social history, popular culture, and contemporary issues have been published in magazines such as *Mother Jones*, the *Nation*, the *New Republic*, and *Ms.* Ehrenreich's book-length critiques of American society include *The Worst Years of Our Lives* (1981) and *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and Flight from Commitment* (1983). Her collection of essays *The Snarling Citizen* (1995) includes this article.

CULTURAL BAGGAGE

by Barbara Ehrenreich

An acquaintance was telling me about the joys of rediscovering her ethnic and religious heritage. "I know exactly what my ancestors were doing 2,000 years ago," she said, eyes gleaming with enthusiasm, "and I can do the same things now." Then she leaned forward and inquired politely, "And what is your ethnic background, if I may ask?"

"None," I said, that being the first word in line to get out of my mouth. Well, not "none," I backtracked. Scottish, English, Irish--that was something, I supposed. Too much Irish to qualify as a WASP, too much of the hated English to warrant a "Kiss Me, I'm Irish" button; plus there are a number of dead ends in the family tree due to adoptions, missing records, failing memories, and the like. I was blushing by this time. Did "none" mean I was rejecting my heritage out of Anglo-Celtic self-hatred? Or was I revealing a hidden chauvinism in which the Britannically-derived serve as a kind of neutral standard compared to the ethnic "others"?

Throughout the sixties and seventies I watched one group after another--African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans--stand up and proudly reclaim their roots while I just sank back ever deeper into my seat. All this excitement over ethnicity stemmed, I realized, from a past in which their ancestors had been trampled upon by my ancestors, or at least by people who looked very much like them. In addition, it had begun to seem almost un-American not to have some sort of hyphen in hand, linking one to more venerable times and locales.

But the truth is I was raised with "none." We'd eaten ethnic foods in my childhood home, but these were all borrowed, like the pasties, or Cornish meat pies, my father had picked up from his fellow miners in Butte. If my mother had one rule, it was militant ecumenicism in all matters of food and experience: "Try new things," she would say, meaning anything from sweetbreads to clams, with an emphasis on the "new."

As a child, I briefly nourished a craving for roots. I immersed myself in the works of Sir Walter Scott. I pretended to believe the bagpipe was a musical instrument. I was fascinated to learn from a grandmother that we were descended from certain Highland clans, and I longed for a pleated skirt in one of their distinctive tartans.

But in *Ivanhoe* it was the dark-eyed "Jewess" Rebecca I identified with, not the flaxen-haired bimbo Rowena. As for clans: why not call them "tribes," those bands of

half-clad peasants and warriors whose idea of cuisine was stuffed sheep gut washed down with whiskey? And then there was the sting of Disraeli's remark, which I came across in my teens to the effect that his ancestors had been leading orderly, literate lives when my ancestors were still daubing themselves with blue paint.

I recalled that my mother never introduced a domestic procedure by telling me, "Grandma did it this way." What did Grandma know, living in the days before vacuum cleaners and disposable toilet mops? In my parents' general view, new things were better than old, and the very fact that some ritual had been performed in the past was a good reason for abandoning it now. Because what was the past, as our forebears knew it? Nothing but poverty, superstition, and grief. "Think for yourself," Dad used to say. "Always ask why."

In fact, this may have been the ideal cultural heritage for an ethnic strain like my own--bounced as it was from the Highlands of Scotland across the sea, then across the plains to the Rockies, down into the mines, and finally spewed out into high-tech, suburban America. What better philosophy, for a race of migrants, than "Think for yourself"? What better maxim, for a people whose whole world was rudely inverted every thirty years or so, than "Try new things"?

The more tradition-minded, the newly enthusiastic celebrants of Purim and Kwanzaa and Solstice, will be clucking sadly as they read this. They will see little point to survival if the survivors carry no cultural freight--religion, for example, or ethnic tradition. To which I would say that skepticism, curiosity, and wide-eyed ecumenical tolerance are also part of the human tradition, and are at least as old as such notions as "Serbian" or "Croatian," "Scottish" or "Jewish." I make no claims for my personal line of progenitors except that they remained steadfastly loyal to the values that induced all of our ancestors, long, long ago, to climb down from the trees and make their way into the open savanna.

A few weeks ago, I cleared my throat and asked my children, now mostly grown and fearsomely smart, whether they felt any stirrings of ethnic identity, etc., which might have been, ahem, insufficiently nourished at home. "None," they said, adding firmly, "and the world would be a better place if nobody else did either." My chest swelled with pride, as my mother's would have, to know that the race of "none" marches on.

ESSAY TOPIC

Ehrenreich's essay reflects a long-held American idea: that an American is someone who chooses to create an identity rather than to merely accept a cultural, historical, religious, ethnic, familial, occupational, or other inherited tradition. To what extent do you believe it is possible (and desirable) for a person to do so? In formulating your answer, you may refer to your experience, the experiences of others, or to any of your reading, including, of course, to "Cultural Baggage" itself.