

# Comment

## *British Beef*

'Take a thick piece of buttock beef', an English recipe of 1765 instructs, 'lay it to soak in a pint of claret wine and a pint of wine vinegar, the beef being first seasoned with peper nutmegg and salt and soe let it lye two days, then take the beef and put it in a pasty well seasoned with nutmeg and salt'.

Whether the suspected cases of Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease constitute an epidemic is not clear. Nor is the connection with bovine spongiform encephalopathy established. But the European Union has prohibited imports of British beef, the government is considering culling, and even mass slaughter, of older cattle, and seeks compensation from the EU. The prospect for farmers, and the thousands who work in beef-related industries, is grim.

Apart from fears about eating diseased meat, people have been disturbed by a series of connected issues. How many of us knew that cows, which we thought of as herbivores munching away happily in the fields, were often fed protein made from dead sheep? How many of us realized that cosmetics, sweets, gelatin, and other unlikely products, used uneatable bits of cow? How many of us really understood that beefburgers, sausages and pies might be composed of 'mechanically recovered meat'?

The ban has also revealed xenophobia. Once again, this happy breed, this blessed plot, finds itself up against the envy of less happier lands — foreign veterinarians, huddled in Brussels, gloating with *Schadenfreude*. But it is more complicated. Once upon a time we never drank water on the Continent. When the Queen made her state visit to the *Bundesrepublik* in 1965, she took crates of Malvern water. Now our water industry, being sold off to foreigners, apparently needs millions spent on making the stuff safe by European standards. Once upon a time we showed others how to play cricket and even football — enough said! In one domain after another the symbols of effortless British superiority are becoming a joke.

'Old England's roast beef' was first celebrated by Henry Fielding, in *The Grub-Street Opera* (1731), in the first decades of the invention of Great Britain. With *Tom Jones* especially, he is the one from whom Dickens, Thackeray and the Victorian novelists derive. Like all nations, the British have relied on myths, as well as institutions, to maintain their identity — Dickensian Christmases, Trollopean cathedral closes, and

much else.(English myths, funnily enough.) In a dozen other ways it would be easy to list, belonging to the European Union is exposing the fragility of the United Kingdom. To have our beef rejected by the Continent may, or may not, show how unreasonable these foreigners are. But such a paranoid response might itself only show how deeply confused the very idea of being British now is. The mad cows have ripped through one more cherished myth.

F.K.

## Aquinas's Model of Mind

Patrick Quinn

### The Weakness of the Human Mind

One of the most interesting features in Aquinas's theory of mind relates to his view that the human intellect is inferior to that of an angel. St. Thomas gives the impression that if only our minds could act in the same way as those of the angels, many of our noetic difficulties would disappear. The weakness of the human mind is due, he believes, to the discursive process of human cognition which results from the application of our understanding to the potentially intelligible data that is acquired from the senses. Aquinas quite frequently deplores this mental condition, claiming that it represents a form of intellectual weakness (e.g. *S.T.* I.58.3). The result of such a discursive process is that the human mind struggles to understand by means of lengthy and arduous mental efforts (*S.T.* I.89.1). By comparison, the intuitive grasp of the angelic mind is swift and immediate, capable of directly obtaining knowledge of first principles (*S.T.* I.58.3). Aquinas perceives the latter ability as a sign that angels are truly intellectual beings in a way that humans are not and he reserves for us the term rational (*rationales vocantur*) as a way of describing our slower intellectual ability. In such a context, rationality obviously does not constitute a positive description but rather denotes a form of mental weakness (*ex debilitate intellectualis*). The latter, according to *S.T.* I.58.3, is quite clearly the