The common sea

Mourning a certain idea of Europe

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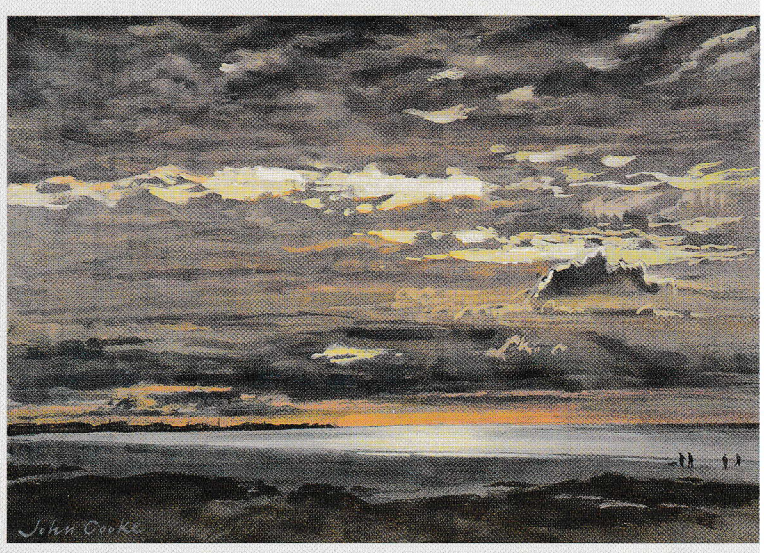

ON JUNE 24th 2016, a Friday, the sun rose over the Sussex coast in a hard blue sky. As the shocking news came through, the Channel—at that point, 60 miles of sea between Britain and continental Europe—seemed suddenly 600 miles wide.

Treaties are rescinded, alliances break, but what began to fade that day, and set to vanish in 2019, is harder to define. It was not hope, for those who voted to leave the European Union had great expectations of the future. Nor was it *l'esprit communautaire*, that spirit of a common enterprise tending to greater union, like some well-organised street party which everyone must attend. Britain always stayed warily, sometimes huffily, in its own corner.

It seems that what died on Referendum Day was something much more elemental: a sense of shared space. The loss was sharpest where Britain and Europe draw closest, on the Channel coasts. Those rugged cliffs of chalk or sandstone, long icons of defensiveness, were only part of the shoreline and the story. Much of the rest spreads out in creeks, havens, marshlands and shingle slopes where any chancing foreigner might land, and many did: Normans at Pevensey, Plantagenets in Normandy. For centuries they beached their boats, stole or borrowed what was useful, and burrowed in. On both sides the blend of deterrence and opportunity, rebuff and welcome, persisted for so long that it had settled by the mid-20th century into quiet propinquity.

That long scrapping history was not forgotten: all sacked or scorched churches in Sussex were still blamed on the French, as many rocks and gullies in the French south-west would always be named after English raiders. On the English coast Martello towers, thrown up against Napoleon, still trained their guns on France—but also happily served tea and cake to daytrippers from "over there". Just over there, no distance at all. Travellers on Eurostar trains became used to slipping under the ever-narrower sea, accepting the broadening landscape of the Pas de Calais as naturally as, going the other way, they broached the ridges of the Chilterns.

So near, so far

Closeness was a fact of life. The sea, far from being impassible, could not be fortified, walled off, set with guards, but lay vulnerable and open. Eighteenth-century smugglers of lace and brandy past the English Excise proved the point on any calm night, as migrant-smugglers did later. Coastguard patrols were always notional. The water's very names underlined that familiarity: "the Channel", as if both sides had combined to excavate it, and, even more, "la Manche", like the sleeve of a seamless coat. High on England's white cliffs, at Beachy Head, the old Belle Tout lighthouse was assumed by most locals to be French for "all's beautiful". Shared space naturally transmitted shared thoughts and words.

Each side was a reflection of the other

The light, too, was shared, and in a way that was fascinating rather than competitive. The opposite aspects of the French and English shores meant that each side was a reflection of the other. In the many paintings by Monet and his contemporaries of the French Channel coast, the shadows, to English eyes, fell the wrong way, across the sea; to French eyes, the coast of southern England was unusually forward-lit. But the essential colour and quality of the light (that slight greyness and mistiness, even in sunshine, of shared latitude) was the same, as was the scene: the stunted wind-blown trees of each coast, the grey-stone boarding houses, the promenaders warmly clad. The sea, too, had that recognisable close, homely Channel look, its small choppy waves reflecting the small, puffy, border-ignoring clouds.

The relationship of England, later Britain, with Europe, typified by France, was always a play of mirrors, or a dance to and fro. What could not occur was indifference or distance. The rival tribes constantly regrouped and readjusted, ever aware that, on a fine day, they could be seen with the naked eye from the nearest points on each other's coasts. What changed on Referendum Day was that one side willingly, even enthusiastically, decided to cut itself off: even though it sailed the same water and breathed the same air.

In 2018 a giant wind farm, 116 turbines, was built eight miles off the Sussex coast. At night its red lights blink on the horizon. By day, if the sun strikes just so, it looks like a metal barrier. What is harder to see, but even more strongly there, is a new wall that is just as real. From March 29th 2019, assuming all goes to the appointed plan, it will mark a death.