In 1989 Duncan Steen and Nicolas Soames published a book entitled *The Essential Englishman*. It is a coffee table book, full of anecdotes and pretty pictures of bowler-hatted, cricket-playing, beef-eating gentlemen. The title, however, is interesting. First of all it is, of course, politically incorrect. Surely women live in England, too. Secondly, the book’s title suggests that the English share a fundamental substance, an *essence*, of Englishness. The essential Englishman is unlike the essential Frenchman, who is unlike the essential German, and so on.

Essentialist ideas about national identity go back at least to the Classical era. Often the climate or local food is seen as the source of the different national characters that people cannot avoid acquiring. Writing in the 1st century BC, Marcus Vitruvius Pollio declared that ‘Nature herself has provided throughout the world that all nations should differ according to the variation of the climate (…). It is climate which causes the variety in different countries’ (Zacharasiewicz 1977, p. 32). In the course of the 18th century, these ideas were re-embraced with a vengeance by a host of philosophers trying to support their explanations of national differences. Oliver Goldsmith, for instance, was convinced the English were a moderate people because of the moderate English climate (Goldsmith 1760). In the 19th century, different nations were equated with distinct ‘races’, which were of unequal quality because of the differences of their ‘blood’. ‘In strength of fist’, Arthur de Gobineau stated in 1853, ‘the English are superior to all the other European races; while the French and Spanish have a greater power of resisting fatigue and privation, as well as the inclemency of extreme climates’ (Gobineau 1999, p. 152).
Today such essentialist ideas of identity are suspect, especially since the Nazi extreme of distinguishing ‘eternal Jews’ from equally ‘eternal’ Arians. If there are essential national or racial differences, these are regarded as the result of nurture rather than nature, of culture rather than climate or blood. The 1951 UNESCO Statement on the Nature of Race and Race Differences declares that ‘the normal individual, irrespective of race, is essentially educable. It follows that his intellectual and moral life is largely conditioned by his training’ (UNESCO 1951). It is by this tenet that this article seeks to investigate some of the inherent qualities of British Euroscepticism. It is argued that British Euroscepticism is of an ‘essential’ nature, in the sense that it is an enduring cultural phenomenon (‘conditioned by training’) that goes much deeper than rejection of EU rules and regulations, or the ‘dictates of Brussels’. At the root of British Euroscepticism lies a long-established tradition of contrasting the British Own with the European Other. British Euroscepticism is to a large extent defined and inspired by cultural exceptionalism.

**Britain and Europe**

David Cameron’s famous speech on ‘Britain and Europe’, which he delivered in London on 23 January 2013, is a good point of departure to track and trace instances of perceived divisions between the national Own and the European Other (Cameron 2013). He formulates five points, or ‘principles’, which have to be addressed in the near future: competitiveness, flexibility, the need for power to flow back to the member states, democratic accountability, and fairness. The figure of five, by the way, is remarkable. In 1966 Labour leader Hugh Gaitskell declared his party would only consent to EEC membership if five conditions were met. In 1974 Prime Minister Wilson announced he would renegotiate the Treaty of Accession on five points; in her 1988 Bruges Speech, Margaret Thatcher listed five ‘guiding principles’; and in 1997 the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown, formulated ‘five economic tests’ to be met before the UK could join the European Monetary Union. Apparently British politicians are hard wired to measure their relationship with the European institutions in units of five. This might be a conscious rhetorical figure (mentioning fewer than five issues lends your argument less weight, mentioning more makes you lose your audience), or this is a nice instance of intertextuality. Consciously or unconsciously, speech writer C copies speech writer B, who copies speech writer A.