

BAMBOOZLED BY BRAND? A STUDY IN BRIAR AND STRAW

By Fred Hanna

Many of us pipe smokers and collectors are on a quest to discover the lore and secrets of the superior smoke. I have been a part of a group of pipe collectors who have identified the brand myth as one of the obstacles to discovering the nature of that fantastic smoke. We believe that if a pipe is well made and the briar is well cured, once a pipe is fully broken in, it is the briar, not the brand, that is the key to determining how that pipe will smoke and taste. We smoke briar, not nomenclature. We may love certain brands, but we smoke our tobacco in briar. I have advanced the hypothetical idea that, in a blind tasting of many brands of pipes already broken in with the same tobacco, smokers would not be able to pick out those individual brands. This is due to the fact that each well-made, fully-broken-in pipe has its own individual character, taste, and smoking qualities due to the briar, regardless of brand. Many, many collectors and well-known pipe makers around the world have since told me that they enthusiastically agree, and many held this view long before I ever wrote about it. It seems that a shared value of all of these folks is the quest to discover the keys to the great smoke.

But it appears that Rick Newcombe doesn't get any of this. Rick has had a lot of influence in the pipe world, but it

may be that his quest is more toward enjoying the romance and mystique of smoking particular brands. In his recent article, "Down with Reductionism," it appears he is primarily concerned with the factors involved in the ENJOYMENT of his pipes, which can be quite different from discovering the FACTORS THAT PRODUCE A GREAT SMOKE.

However, I was puzzled by the unfairness to which he resorted in his critique of the brand-myth position in that article. This is not like Rick at all. His plea to end what he called reductionism involved considerable reductionist thinking on his part. He oversimplified and reduced the brand-myth position in order to take what amounts to little more than a cheap shot. And, along the way, he fell prey to a classic logical fallacy that invalidated all of what he was trying to say. Einstein once said that we should always strive to make things as simple as we can but no more simple than they are. Rick crossed that line in unfairly describing the brand-myth position that he then criticized.

The fatal error in Rick's logic was using what logicians have long identified as the "straw man fallacy." This maneuver, as I am sure you are aware, consists of unfairly distorting, reducing, and altering the opponent's original argument so as to make it easy to attack, destroy, and dismiss. The tactic requires no particular intelligence and is commonly used by opportunistic, deceptive politicians when attacking their opponents. Rick utilized this cheap tactic in classic fashion by asserting that, in my brand-myth thesis,

I reduced the phenomenon of a great smoke down to what he wrote as "one and only one factor": the briar and the mind. Curiously, he mentioned TWO things there, contradicting himself at the outset (!), but no matter. He could not have been more wrong. If only Rick had actually read what I have written over the years, but I don't blame him. I know my writing is pretty boring, but it is a matter of simple courtesy to actually read the writing of an author before criticizing it.

For example, in the issue of the Pipe Collector to which Rick was responding (June, 2004), I specifically stated on page 27 that "there are a MYRIAD of factors that go into what makes a pipe taste the way it does, the mind not the least of those." I then went on to say that it is the briar that "makes the most difference with regard to taste." This is the brand-myth thesis in a nutshell. There are a ton of factors that influence the smoke, but the briar, not the brand, is the most crucial, in the last analysis. Please, Rick, criticize what I actually said. The word "myriad" literally means a vast number. The number "one," which you accused me of, is not generally considered to be vast. Sheesh.

In the original article on the brand myth, I noted in four separate places the importance of such non-briar factors as proper curing and the importance of a pipe being well made and fully broken in. In that and other articles, I also noted other factors, such as the importance of proper positioning of air hole drillings and the smoking style and



psychological mindset of the pipe smoker. Rich Esserman has written in the Ephemeris that he largely agrees with this perspective. But Rick somehow ignored these factors in setting up his straw man argument and claiming Rich as an ally. He was absolutely correct when he said that reducing all of pipe smoking to one factor is "ridiculous." But no one did that. In his article, he was criticizing arguments that apparently exist only in his mind. His depiction of my position was patently unfair, specious, and distorted, and it reduced his article to the point of appearing, pardon me for using his term, "ridiculous."

HAS RICK BEEN BAMBOOZLED BY BRAND?

No one in the hobby has sung the praises of Rick Newcombe more than I have. I once devoted the bulk of an entire article to commending him. He is a great marketer and a master PR person for the great Danish pipe makers. He also deserves credit for asking us to rethink how we see the internal drillings in a pipe. I confess that I would not have expected him to use a cheap trick such as the straw man argument. Nevertheless, it would appear to me that in spite of his insistence on many factors being involved, Rick may well believe that being "bamboozled by brand" is one of those factors involved in a great smoke. This is nothing if not amusing, but it is also rather sad. To be charmed by a brand is a great experience. To admire a brand with great intensity while you are smoking is fantastic. But to believe that one can evaluate the smoking quality of a pipe while being beguiled, blinded, and/or bamboozled by its brand and

nomenclature is rather pitiful. It appears that Rick has done this to the point of a brand actually clouding and obscuring his judgment of a great smoke. Please allow me to explain.

Rich Esserman once used an interesting and accurate metaphor that well describes the difference between Rick's and my position. He said that some people smoke with "eyes wide open," and in that context he was referring to myself and other supporters of the brand-myth thesis as examples. I interpret this to mean that some people are better prepared to attempt to judge the quality of a smoke without preconceived ideas and expectations about the brand of the pipe interfering with that judgment. I have years of research training that to some degree helps me to do this. Is it possible that Rick is so seduced by the brand and the design of the pipes that he loves that he fails to distinguish between the mystique and beauty of the brand of a pipe and the quality of the smoke that issues from it? He seems to say exactly that in his reductionism essay.

For example, Rick is so much in love with S. Bang that he believes that all such pipes will be, as he wrote it, "always great smokes." Always? Yes, he said "always." Give us a break. Rick also specifically wrote, "I have no doubt whatsoever that, if I pull out a broken in S. Bang apple or pot that has been opened the way I like, I will get a fantastic smoke-every time, without exception." He went on to write, "How do I know this? From experience." Maybe what he really meant is that only the apples and pots are the "great" and "fantastic" smokers, while other S. Bangs

not so much. Maybe, but it doesn't seem that way.

I have smoked two S. Bang pipes that were barely mediocre, far inferior to great-smoking pipes I have smoked that cost less than 10% of their price. How do I know this? From experience, of course, just like Rick. Many fellow collectors have told me that there is brand variation in the great Danes' pipes. They have told me, frankly, that some smoke better than others. One well-known collector of great Dane pipes has several times told me that they smoke the same as his Ben Wades. Some, while praising these pipes for their beauty and workmanship, have told me of a few great Dane pipes here and there that, while surpassingly beautiful, are below average in smoking quality. So much for "always great smokes." People must go by their experience, but it sure helps, as Rich Esserman said, if their eyes are wide open; otherwise, their "experience" borders on mere illusion and mind tricks. Bamboozled, perhaps?

It gets worse. Does Rick actually believe, as he wrote, that knowing and liking a pipe maker or liking certain stains makes a pipe smoke better? Amazingly, whether he is aware of it or not, he says exactly that in the last issue of this newsletter. I am sad to see that Rick is now introducing irrelevant, tangential, and confounding factors into the already difficult problem of discovering the secrets of the great smoke.



Bamboozled by brand? So it would seem. THERE IS A DIFFERENCE BETWEEN ENJOYING A PIPE AND EVALUATING ITS SMOKE. A high-grade pipe is highly likely to provide a good smoke, but there are no guarantees. Many high grades I have smoked were dogs, and scores of pipe collectors have told me the same.

But let us look at the other side of this story. Allow me to ask you a question: Do you have a pipe or two in your collection that is a simply magical, completely enthralling smoke? I have a few. One is an Ilsted, another is a Cooke, yet another is an old Charatan. They smoke completely fantastic no matter what tobacco I put in them. But not all Cookes and Ilsteds or any other brand smoke this way. Ultimately, it is the briar, not the brand, that is responsible. I would love to have more of such pipes! Pipes with this quality are what led me to write the original brand-myth article! Those fabulous, magical smokers hold the secrets of superior smoke that fuels my quest.

Rick seems to think that, if the pipe is made by the great Danes, then the smoking quality of the pipe MUST be fantastic. He went as far as to say that knowing and liking the pipe maker is part of this. If we follow this bizarre logic as he wrote it, we conclude that, because these makers are all his friends, this therefore helps the pipes to smoke fantastically well--for him. Knowing and liking a pipe maker is now a

key to a great smoke? This is evidence of pure bamboozlement. To my taste, not all of the great Dane pipes I have smoked have been superior. I once owned a Jess that was good but not great and certainly not magical, to me. Most have been great, but not superior in the magical sense I mentioned above. Rick's strange logic, if you follow it down in the article in question, would have us believe that great Dane pipes would smoke a bit better for Rick than the rest of us because Rick knows the makers better than the majority of us do. This is absurd! Read his article and then form your own conclusion!

Rick's comments may be relevant for enjoying a pipe but not for judging the quality of the smoke. Rick simply doesn't get the brand-myth thing. Some good sense was expressed to me at the last Richmond show. Tom Eltang told a friend and me that his pipes do not smoke any better than well-made, good-quality Stanwells. He said that people seek out Eltang pipes because of the beauty of design, his staining, and the quality of grain, but he said that smoking quality is not the issue. I agree with Tom, of course, and I admire him for being so honest.

Jess Chonowitsch is equally honest in saying that he does nothing to his wood in the way of curing to make his pipes smoke better and that his briar, although beautiful, has essentially the same potential smoking quality as high-quality briar used in other brands. Jess does state emphatically, however, that his precision drillings do influence smoking quality. I agree with this as well, but

Jess is not the only maker who emphasizes great engineering. All of the great pipe makers do. At different times, I have asked Jess and Rainer Barbi if they thought that anyone could pick out their pipes in a blind tasting because of a taste unique to their own respective brand after full break in. Both replied with a flat "no." If a brand were unique and distinct, we could easily taste the differences in a blind tasting format, but almost no one I have talked to seems to believe that it can be done. In a recent Ephemeris issue, Rich Esserman also acknowledged the intrinsic difficulty here.

Rick has repeatedly asserted his own view that the best pipes are made by the great Danes. But he has to alter them to make them smoke better. I also deeply admire their pipes, but I have no urge to alter them. I don't fully agree with Rick on his passionate promotion of wide-open shank drillings, but that is beside the point. Why does Rick have to alter the drillings of the great Danish pipes if they are the best? Perhaps he is seduced more by the prestige, styling, and beauty of the brands than the quality of the smoke? Jeff Goldman recently reminded me that Rick once wrote that he doesn't open Castellos because their air holes are already wide enough. Does that mean that Castellos are better internally engineered than the great Danish pipes? What is Rick's true belief here? I have read Rick's comments on these points, but, to me, they just don't wash. I would think that those makers, if they were really convinced that opening a pipe was ideal, would open



all their pipes, not just the pipes that they make for Rick. As far as I know, they do not do this.

After reading Rick's article, I am inclined to believe that Rick is smoking with "eyes wide shut" and that he loves every minute of it. I do this sometimes as well. I dare say all pipe collectors do on occasion. It is highly enjoyable to contemplate the brand of a pipe and its design, nomenclature, and tradition while smoking it. But please, Rick, don't act as if you are seriously evaluating the quality of a smoke while you are carried away by thoughts of brand mystique, friendship with the maker, idyllic images, and sweet memories. We all love to smoke a gorgeous pipe made by our favorite makers, but should we become so blinded by the experience that it interferes with our quest to discover the secrets of the great smoke? I think not. How a pipe looks, cosmetically, has little to do with how it smokes. Rich Esserman, for example, has written about a GBD and a Larsen F, both with fills and no visual appeal to him at all, that nevertheless were superb smokers, even though he had no real interest in smoking them. This is an example of being able to see beyond appearances, such as brand, stains, and shape, in order to judge the smoking quality of a pipe for what it is. Greg Pease once wrote about an old GBD that had terrible internal drillings and yet smoked extremely well. Greg has acknowledged the validity of the brand-myth thesis and has also written about the variation in smoking quality between pipes of the same brand. We all seem to agree that we do not yet know all the

secrets of the fantastic smoke.

Overall, it is clear to me that Rick is a true pipe romantic. More power to him. But from what he wrote in this last article, I am no longer sure if he cares how a pipe smokes apart from brand. For all I know, he may in fact enjoy being bamboozled by brand. I don't know that for sure, but it seems that he does not seem to understand that THERE IS A DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE ENJOYMENT OF A PIPE AND LEARNING THE FACTORS THAT PRODUCE A GREAT SMOKE. Furthermore, there is a difference between the smoking quality of a pipe and the collecting quality of a pipe.

I have written ad nauseam about how there is variation in smoking quality between pipes of the same brand. Of course, a high-grade pipe is more likely to produce a great smoke than a lesser pipe, but there are no guarantees. As Marty Pulvers once said, it is possible that a basket pipe COULD smoke better than a Bo Nordh. IT ALSO DEPENDS ON THE TYPE OF TOBACCO IN THE PIPE AND THE TASTE OF THE SMOKER. Curiously, S. Bang, the brand that Rick was so obviously promoting in his article, is an example of such variation. I am sure I will burn in hell for saying this, but the two inferior smoking S. Bangs I spoke of earlier were worse smokers than some inexpensive Stanwells and Comoy's I have owned. This is totally contrary to Rick's claims of "always great." On the other hand, I currently own a Bang that is a simply exquisite smoker. What's the difference? It's as I have said all along: When the broken-in pipe is well made and the briar well cured, it's the briar not the brand.

Some collectors, I have learned, are so brand conscious that it is uncomfortable for them, or unnecessary, to see beyond the brand of a pipe. Rick may be one of those. In his article, he did more marketing and advertising than analyzing. That's fine with me. All I ask is that one be straightforward about it. As I have said, many of us collectors, but not all, are on a quest to learn the secrets of the superior smoke, and sometimes this requires questioning the status quo and the mystique of the great brands. To his credit, Rick has done this with his insistence on opening pipes, but not much beyond that. Those of us who are on the quest don't always agree about certain issues, of course, but we love to compare notes. But it is clear to me, at least, that much of the quest depends on being able to evaluate pipe smoke on its own merit without getting led astray by the famous, or obscure, brand from which the smoke emerges. There is a difference between enjoying pipes and coldly and objectively analyzing the quality of a smoke. When I started smoking high grades 30 years ago, this became evident to me after a couple of years, and it is true for scores of other collectors who have contacted me. Rick, in spite of all his experience, seems hesitant to make this distinction and thus unfairly distorts discussions about briar into arguments made of straw.

