



**AMERICA AND THE BRITISH
IMAGINARY IN TURN-OF-THE-
TWENTIETH-CENTURY LITERATURE**

Brook Miller



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For Chrissy

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INTRODUCTION

Books on America are as the sands of the sea for multitude.

—*Times of London*, April 19, 1900

For many generations the person who rejoices in the name of “Britisher” has comfortably divided the known Universe into Himself and Foreigners, with a further confidence . . . too deep to need expression, that these two classes are respectively placed by Providence in a sphere that may roughly be described as “All Right,” and in various zones of outer darkness . . . but a suspicion has become . . . planted in his breast that the American is not as other foreigners are.

—Theodore Cook

Americans are often unaware of the accommodations forced upon people the world over by their nation’s emergence as an economic, military, and cultural “superpower” in the twentieth century. For the superpower of the nineteenth century, Great Britain, America’s rapid rise engendered a wide range of responses, from anxious to humorous, that sought to make sense of the United States in terms of its relation to Britain. This book argues that related changes occur in British self-representation during this period and that texts featuring Anglo-American¹ relationships provide fertile material for documenting the rise of contemporary British attitudes toward nationality and culture. In writing about America, British writers intervened in the discourse of what their nation was and might be.

This introduction will briefly examine the pressures that altered Anglo-American relations and how the conversations that arose from these pressures recast what British authors valued in their nation. Then I’ll introduce the central theme circulated within these discussions—the elevation of culture and self-cultivation via contact with culture over the national character—in British literary

discourse with particular reference to Matthew Arnold's commentary about America. Finally, this section will consider the theoretical underpinnings of a question that connects the readings in the chapters that follow: how do narrative representations of America participate in a wider shift from national character to culture in British self-representation?

The answers to this last question are, unsurprisingly, many and contingent. In Anglo-American discourse we discover the republic in many costumes: as a "daughter" or "cousin" of Britain; as a "tabula rasa"; as a breakaway colony; as an "English-speaking people"; as a beacon in the pursuit of liberty; as a crucial trading partner; as an imperial threat, partner, and competitor; as a mutual member of the Anglo-Saxon race; as a mutual inheritor of the legacies of "Teutonic origins"; as a source and embodiment of "modernities" both cultural and economic; as a vacation spot; as a worshipper of British culture; as a critic of British culture; and as the site of a virtual infinity of personal relations for British citizens, the overwhelming majority of which remain lost to us.

In examining key political and social events and ideas that had a shaping, and thus uniting, effect upon the realm of the personal, and in examining a variety of key literary texts that express and query the shifting British views of America circulating with these ideas, this book participates in the development of the emergent field of transatlantic studies, or Atlantic studies. Literary scholarship increasingly resists the paradigm of national literatures that has been dominant since the introduction of modern literary studies into university curricula. A recent turn toward circum-Atlantic histories enhances our grasp of the complexities of literary production and other published writing within the Americas, Europe, and Africa. The work of Paul Giles, Paul Gilroy, Amy Kaplan, Joseph Roach, and many others provides a foundation for teaching and scholarship in what Susan Manning and Andrew Taylor describe as "reading transatlantically" (11).

This book, in focusing on British perspectives regarding the United States, may seem to resist this trajectory, and thereby to be aligned with traditions of cultural studies that this new movement opposes, reifying national character and culture as categories of highest value. The relative lack of material from writers marginalized from the national narrative—including women—may seem to affirm a focus upon traditional, hegemonic voices.²

This is largely the result of the prolific, interrelated writings that registered shifts in Anglo-American relations during this period. I argue that British cultural criticism at the turn of the twentieth century operates within what Ann Ardis and Patrick Collier have described as a “transatlantic print culture” and promotes an evolving British ideal of cultivated citizenship; that is, it uneasily and differentially circulates between the national and the cosmopolitan, promoting the salutary effects of contact with British culture. The voices that echo throughout this book demonstrate ambivalent allegiances to, on the one hand, the enduring value of their national affiliations and, on the other, the rhetorical modes that unite both national and transnational political and cultural communities as loci of the values necessary to preserve or restore the health of the national community. Rather than reifying the national, this book seeks to illuminate the cultural stakes of transnational contacts from the perspectives of cultural critics deeply impacted by political and social context and deeply affiliated with intellectual communities to and for whom their insights are directed. Anglo-American relations become a key staging ground for the importance of cultivation, while the emergence of a transatlantic readership complicates an older rhetoric of national differences.

The educational component of this cultivated ideal—what Leslie Butler calls “educative citizenship”—reflects the dual scholarly conversations in which this book participates (14).³ While the movement toward transatlantic literary studies is energized by pressure exerted upon international borders by recent scholarship in American Studies, many scholars focused upon late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century British culture are revising models of domestic hierarchies, especially between “mass” and “high” culture.

My approach blends these perspectives, drawing upon the transnational and the national as malleable, performative forums in which power is both affirmed and resisted and in which multiple, popular, and relatively neglected discursive contexts are illumined as sources for narrative. Indebted to Armitage and Braddick’s notion of “*Cis-Atlantic*” history (national or regional history within an Atlantic frame), this book examines how a variety of international pressures, emanating from or attributed to America, impacted British discourse about national character and culture. Additionally, the maturation of transatlantic print culture meant that domestic discourse often was consumed by, and indeed written

for, a complex transatlantic readership. At the same time, the materials I consider reflect a belief that in order to fill in gaps between Victorian and modernist literary history, we should heed Duncan Bell's call to delve into the "murky shallows" of popular, influential discourse and connect it to literary production (22). Throughout this book, but particularly in Chapters 2 and 3, Anglo-American discourse is drawn from sources not heretofore considered in scholarly discussions of the period: commentary from Anglo-American newspapers as well as mainstream papers, speeches and notices from cultural commentators and about public events like the King Alfred Millenary, and material from popular fictions offer a sense of the rich, broad discursive context in which cultural texts appeared. Doing so illuminates the "profound overlap" between high and mass culture in Britain, explored by Aaron Jaffe and a host of recent modernist critics (Jaffe 88). It also provides a means of disentangling the nationalist and literary programs of turn-of-the-century writing from the *grand recits* propounded by older scholarly approaches by making the production and simulation of a transatlantic public sphere visible. That is, where transatlanticism opened up scholarly conversations to hitherto neglected, marginalized voices, it also functioned as a forum in which competing, often hegemonic forces engaged in discourses about identity and cultural value.

Grappling with this overlap involves disentangling strategic assertions of a "great divide" from our older conceptions of its actuality. My method is to read assertions of this divide transatlantically by tracking how stagings of Anglo-American encounters and relations reflect a variety of arguments about schisms affecting modern British life—schisms that certainly involved realms of cultural production but that also, and often in combination, involved claims about temporal, national, racial, imperial, and gender divides that separate a cultivated citizenry from its antagonists, or even from self-realization.

Here texts about and that include references to the United States perform acts of cultural criticism that simulate the function of "national narratives" for British readers. In an influential essay, Donald Pease describes national narratives as "having constituted literary forms wherein official national fantasies were transmitted to a 'national people' that they aspired simultaneously to consolidate and represent" (40). The articulation and dissemination of

British national narratives is a plural historical phenomenon, deeply intertwined with the domestic and international discourses of the day and both rhetorically strategic and reflective of the perspectives associated with particular audiences. In the texts considered in this book, they are sometimes evoked through fictional British characters encountering fictional American characters and sometimes indirectly, through tonal cues meant to create a shared sense of values between narrator and reader.

By grounding commonality in models of outward-looking acts of criticism calibrated to train a reader's analytic refinement, these texts complicate the work of the "national narrative" considerably. These texts reveal twinned themes—the celebration of Britain as a repository of culture, rather than as a contemporary power fueled by the might of the character of its subjects, and the celebration of subjectivities for culture; that is, subject positions derived from exposure to, and bent upon the preservation of, cultural legacies, artifacts, and ideals. In this manner educative citizenship is trained in a new relation to the national narrative, one in which, paradoxically, the essence of nationality involved a sense of temporal displacement in which the self guards, seeks, preserves, or laments the passing of an imaginary time in which the *natio* and the national culture were coextensive.

In addition, the programs promoted through "national narratives" evolve during the time period in question. By the end of the modernist period, according to Jed Esty, modernist writing "promoted . . . the redemptive agency of *culture*, which is restricted by national or ethnolinguistic borders" (3). This thematic involved a new emphasis upon national culture as an object of study separated from the *natio* (used in this book as a term for the populace as a national community). The period examined here represents a transitional moment in the turn toward culture, in which a complex patchwork of theories of "immanent" cultural superiority, coming from racist, religious, and other discourses, continued to play an important role in defining the terms of national identity. I offer this perspective while conscious that, in claiming that the turn of the century represented shifts toward the "culturalism" Esty explores, I am offering a "prehistory" of what is already a "prehistory" for Esty, who argues that late modernist writing anticipates a transition other critics have assigned to post-World War II English culture. The story of the emergence of culture as an autonomous

entity is, as any reader of Raymond Williams knows, a virtual epic, but the turn of the century, perhaps partly because of the cosmopolitan character of many of its leading cultural figures, plays an underappreciated role in these transitions.

Cultural discourse about America helped renegotiate the terms of the national narrative from an emphasis upon character to culture. This involved the emergence of critical perspectives that questioned the viability of mid-Victorian concepts of identification. As Patrick Brantlinger puts it, “Some modernist writers . . . already approximate the critical recognition of what is fetishistic about the very construction of national identity” (*The Reading Lesson* 7). The intensive transatlantic intercourse with America and Americans, whose national narratives overlapped, usurped, and competed with their British counterparts, provided an important stimulus for thinking outside of older categories. The American story was widely and loudly broadcast within the discursive fields the writers in this study traversed. Above all, this critical consciousness emerges not in radical opposition to British ideologies, but with and through them. It is part of a cultural turn that sought to preserve rather than destroy.

BRITISH ANALYSES OF AMERICA AND BRITISH SOCIETY AT THE TURN OF THE CENTURY

Analyses of America are not, of course, unique to British authors. From Hegel to Baudrillard, the roster of European intellectuals who trained their attention upon America is impressive by any accounting: Talleyrand, Fichte, de Tocqueville, Stendhal, Beauvoir, Baudelaire, Buffon, Crèvecoeur, Heine, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Burckhardt, Schopenhauer, Goethe, Gramsci, Kafka, Freud, Lacan, and Derrida represent just a few of the figures who engaged the subject of America, often describing “Americanization” as a force threatening European culture beginning as early as 1800, “during the first period of modern globalism” (van Elteren 7).

Yet British writings around the turn of the twentieth century compose the subject of this study. Why this narrow window? Stephen Spender, in *Love-Hate Relations*, mused that the figure of the American has played a key role in British evaluations of their own status: “The relationship was a kind of measuring instrument on which the English and Americans read off national

strengths and weaknesses . . . The American is at first a ‘colonial’; then, after independence, free but still culturally dependent; then self-sufficing, but in need of European crutches; then decidedly adolescent, brash and self-assertive . . . then rising high above the worn-out shell of Europe” (4).

The time frame examined here, focusing upon the mid-1890s through the first years of the twentieth century, corresponds to the penultimate stage of Spender’s chronology. How did British authors reconceive the status of the national culture in this transition from mastery to exhaustion, and what role was America imagined to play?

While the character of the United States has been a subject of intense scrutiny in British writing literally since the day the American Revolutionary War ended, at the end of the nineteenth century two notable phenomena occurred: first, the number of published travel narratives about the United States more than doubled; second, America and Americans became staples of British fiction. Whether writing about the realities of domestic social life or fantasizing about the far reaches of the empire, British writers brought America and Americans into the fabric of their fictions even when their subject had little to do with the United States.

To account for these phenomena, I will briefly mention changes within British society and in Anglo-American relations (the first chapter explores this history in more detail). The period between 1870 and 1914 witnessed the abundant growth of new traditions in British and, more widely, European society.⁴ These new rituals, emblems, and institutions promoted a national cultural ideal accessible to legions of newly literate citizens and helped reconcile antagonistic social groups by offering images of aristocratic privilege as the shared weal of the public.

Meanwhile, Anglo-American relations shifted dramatically as well. Residual tensions over the Civil War, Britain’s increased diplomatic isolation with the international politics of imperialism, a border dispute in South America, debates about the gold standard, Irish politics, America’s growing debt to Britain, American publishers’ ongoing resistance to international copyright standards, and Britain’s relative decline as a sea power and industrial producer all impacted exchanges between the two nations. Indeed, several British politicians and commentators suggested a

formalized political bond between the nations, partly as a way of sustaining British influence.

These proposals failed, but what would become, in Winston Churchill's idiom, "the Special Relationship" was realized in intensified Anglo-American interactions, facilitated by increased tourism and travel; a spike in Anglo-American marriages;⁵ scholarly exchanges; growth in the availability of literary, scientific, and cultural texts on both sides of the Atlantic; and a proliferation of race discourse about Anglo-Saxon superiority and the role common "Teutonic origins" played in making the two nations beacons of liberty and progress. This mutual affirmation led to rather surprising results: at the close of the nineteenth century, for example, municipal governments held American Independence Day celebrations in London and many of Britain's smaller cities.

Among these interactions, disputes over international copyrights dominated transatlantic discussions of literary issues. Many of the British texts about America—from the travel narratives explored in Chapter 1, to the newspapers and periodicals of Chapter 2, to the novels, short stories, and essays considered in the remainder of the book—contain direct references to the problems of Anglo-American copyright.

The issue both divided and united Anglo-American cultural commentators, and disputes grew steadily through the nineteenth century. The passage of the Chace Act in 1891, which secured international copyright after decades of antagonism between British and American writers, publishers, and others, stands as a signal achievement, promoting closer Anglo-American literary relations and contributing to a richer sense of a shared cultural conversation between intellectual elites from both nations. According to Robert Colby, the Chace Act stimulated "Anglo-American literary symbiosis," evidenced by increasing numbers of British texts on American publishers' catalogs and vice versa, increasing transatlantic ties between authors' societies, increased notices of books from across the pond in periodicals, and the weekly journal *Literature*, produced by the *London Times* and promoting "a cosmopolitan outlook" that included William Dean Howells and Henry James as contributors to an "American Letters Department" (130).

While a success achieved by coordinated efforts by authors and publishers primarily from London and New York, the Chace Act did not remove tensions entirely. The limitations of the legislation,

from the perspective of British publishers and authors, included rules that forced publishers to have American editions typeset at considerable expense or risk having their books printed by American firms.⁶ The effect of this was, according to James West, that “the American printing industry was protected from British competition, and the American book market remained relatively inaccessible to British publishers” (305). The circulation of texts in transatlantic print culture was markedly asymmetrical, with periodicals subject to different lengths of delay across the Atlantic, but generally flowing more freely than books; nonfiction British books made even more limited appearances.

These commercial and literary frustrations were writ large in the metaphors through which British commentators described America and Anglo-American relations. During this dynamic period, British narratives about America and Americans shifted from comparativist analysis to what Daniel Rodgers calls an “aesthetic framing whose keys . . . were culture, custom, and time” (39). As Catherine Armstrong, Roger Fagge, and Tim Lockley describe it, British cultural critics depicted America as “on the one hand . . . a land of personal freedom and individualism, of boundless economic opportunity and broad social equality. On the other hand America has been perceived as having a self-confidence bordering on arrogance where higher culture is usually subsumed by materialism, where the poor can be easily left to fend for themselves, and where foreign policy can be dogmatic and aggressive” (2). These characterizations were resonantly antithetical to cherished and threatened qualities associated with British national identity. James Epstein, surveying the role America played in the Victorian imagination, emphasizes that in British texts “America was . . . imagined, debated and theorized” as “the site of ‘the modern,’ . . . entail[ing] a desacralization of tradition, an assertion of openness and freedom unbounded by the past or history, a restless desire to move within the horizon of an always imminent present . . . [and] a national and individual doctrine of self-referentiality” (107–8).

On the whole, analyses of America and Americans entailed a paradox—on the one hand, the authors relate the self-conscious anxieties of Americans to the textual, tautological nature of American national legitimacy;⁷ on the other hand, the economic nature of some American aspirational narratives leads to a sense of (often monstrous) homogeneity. That is, these critiques simultaneously