

A Love-Hate Relationship

Quotes by and about Americans

Assembled by Guest Editor Derek Turner

The first British comments on America were overwhelmingly positive. Captain John Smith and other early settlers spoke glowingly of the rich new country being opened up for exploitation, while Puritans seem to have thought, with Winthrop, that America was their “City on a Hill” or rhapsodized: “Methinks I see in my mind a noble and puissant nation, rousing herself like a strong man after sleep, and shaking her invincible locks: methinks I see her as an eagle, mewing her mighty youth, and kindling her endazzled eyes at the full mid-day beam.”¹

But political problems and the struggle for independence soon weakened the charm for many British observers. The usually well-balanced Dr. Johnson disliked Americans even more than he disliked Scots, and said of them: “Sir, they are a race of convicts, and ought to be thankful for anything we allow them short of hanging.”² It was Johnson, of course, who famously asked: “How is it that we hear the loudest yelps for liberty among the drivers of Negroes?”³

Johnson was counterbalanced by Burke, an early advocate of a “special relationship”: “My hold of the colonies is in the close affection which grows from common names, from kindred blood, from similar privileges and equal protection. These are ties which, though light as air, are as strong as links of iron.”⁴

But British criticism continued almost unabated during the 19th century. “I do not like them. I do not like their principles. I do not like their manners. I do not like their opinions” said Frances Trollope in 1832.⁵ Charles Dickens too disliked American democracy, and found himself temporarily unpopular in America thanks to his heavy-handed satire in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, in which he makes the newsboys cry: “Here’s this morning’s New York *Sewer*! Here’s this morning’s New York *Stabber*!”⁶

Distrust of America was shared by some British politicians. Robert Cecil, three times Prime Minister, was a strong supporter of the South during the Civil War,

noting Lincoln’s “personal nullity” and comparing Sherman to Genghis Khan and Tamerlane.⁷ More recently, British politicians have been far less critical. But in the 1940s, Harold Macmillan could still say: “You will find the Americans much as the Greeks found the Romans “ great big, vulgar, bustling people, more vigorous than we are and also more idle, with more unspoiled virtues but also more corrupt.”

When a British delegation went to Washington to discuss the repayment of the American war loan, a joke note was circulated, which read: “In Washington Lord Halifax / Whispered to Lord Keynes / “It’s true they’ve all the money bags, / But we’ve got all the brains.”⁸

When Enoch Powell was asked whether he were anti-American, he replied: “Most people are. The only change is that it has become a term of abuse.” When asked why, he answered, somewhat unsatisfactorily: “Well, I just don’t like America, or Americans. It is like saying you like sugar in your tea. *De gustibus non est disputandum*.”⁹

The generally negative tone of many British commentators was explained thus by the American writer, Washington Irving: “It has been the peculiar lot of our country to be visited by the worst kind of English travelers. It has been left to the broken-down tradesman, the scheming adventurer, the wandering mechanic, the Manchester and Birmingham agent, to be [Britain’s] oracles respecting America.”¹⁰

But some British people — and their number is increasing — are devoted to America. “A few generations of life in the new country had already made a change in the English stock ... the sleepy, good-humoured lion of the old world seemed to be taking on talons and wings... The old English love of law and home was still there, but something fierce and primitive was being added. Soon an eagle would take the air” wrote the popular historian Arthur Bryant in 1936.¹¹ “In the Mid West and West the young man, in his blue jeans and crew cut, can still feel that he represents something simpler, bigger, better, than his European equivalent. He is still in a special sense the heir of honesty, adventure,

self-assertion without privilege or protection” observed Martin Green in 1957.¹² Nowadays, more people seem to realize, with Peter Brimelow, that “No civilized person can be indifferent to the fate of America.”¹³

Although few Americans can match the Anglophilia of Alice Duer Miller — “I have seen much to hate here — much to forgive, / But in a world where England is finished and dead, / I do not wish to live”¹⁴ — the American view of Britain is generally kinder than the British view of America. Washington Irving again: “With all his odd humours and obstinate prejudices, [“John Bull”] is a sterling-hearted old blade. He may not be as wonderfully fine a fellow as he thinks himself, but he is at least twice as good as his neighbours represent him.”¹⁵ America seems to have spent less time insulting other countries than in praising itself, often in extravagant terms.

The attitude of the American tourist encountered in Exeter Cathedral in 1929 by the British writer H. V. Morton is still a common one: “We kind of sneer at tradition, but, believe me, under our skins we admire it and wish we had it.”¹⁶ But although Americans may like seeing Beefeaters at the Tower of London, or the Trooping of the Color, their attitude toward our monarchy is understandably colored by history. However, Truman’s behavior may have been more than usually disrespectful when he diarized: “George VI sent me a personal letter today ... not much impressed ... save it for [their daughter] Maggie’s scrap book.”¹⁷

Some Americans find Britain frustrating, but it is the frustration felt by one family member toward another. As Walter Hines Page, U.S. Ambassador to Britain, wrote: “These English are the most interesting study in the world. Just when you’d like to hang them for their stupidity, you become aware of such noble stuff in them that you thank God that they were your ancestors.”¹⁸

Hines Page is not the only American to have found British complacency puzzling or irritating. As Ogden Nash noted “To be an Englishman is to belong to the most exclusive club in the world.” Bill Beutel, an American newspaperman, once said “The English don’t give a damn about what others think of them ... they think it is everyone else’s genuine loss not to have been

**“Some Americans find
Britain frustrating,
but it is the frustration felt
by one family member
toward another.”**

born English.”¹⁹ Paul Gallico had to concede that “No-one can be as calculatedly rude as the British.”²⁰ Americans (and others) often say that the British are repressed. An amusing echo of this perception is found within the sex industry, where the slang term “English culture” means bondage.²¹

A suitable quotation to close this brief selection from a vast literature of Anglo-American encounter is Emerson’s ringing peroration to *English Traits*: “All hail! Mother of nations, mother of heroes, with strength still equal to the time ... if the courage of England goes ... I will go back to the capes of Massachusetts, and my own Indian stream, and say to my countrymen, the old race are all gone, and the elasticity and hope of mankind must henceforth remain on the Alleghany ranges, or nowhere.”²²

Americans and Britons of good will should alike hope that Emerson’s words, written so long ago and in such a climate of optimism, may find a contemporary resonance. •

NOTES

¹ *The Liberty of the Press*, Milton, no date.

² Conversation with Dr. John Campbell, 1769.

³ *Taxation No Tyranny: an answer to the Resolutions and Address of the American Congress*, 1775.

⁴ *On Conciliation with the Colonies*, 22 March 1775.

⁵ *Domestic Manners of the Americans*, 1832.

⁶ *Martin Chuzzlewit*, 1843-44.

⁷ Quoted in *Salisbury: Victorian Titan*, Andrew Roberts, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London, 1999.

⁸ Both quoted in *The English*, Jeremy Paxman, Penguin, London, 2000.

⁹ Interview, 1986, cited in *Like The Roman: The Life of Enoch Powell*, Simon Heffer, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London, 1998.

¹⁰ *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent*, published in periodical form between 1819 and 1820.

¹¹ *The American Ideal*, Longmans, Green and Co, London, 1936.

¹² *A Mirror for Anglo-Saxons*, Longmans, London, 1957

¹³ *Alien Nation*, Random House, New York, 1995.

¹⁴ *The White Cliffs*, Methuen, London, 1941.

¹⁵ *Sketch Book*, *ibid.*

¹⁶ *In Search of England*, Methuen, London, 1929.

¹⁷ Cited in *Eminent Churchillians*, Andrew Roberts, Phoenix, London, 1994.

¹⁸ Letter to Woodrow Wilson, 1916.

¹⁹ Both quotations from *As Others See Us*, Reader's Digest Association, London, 1991.

²⁰ *As Others See Us*, *ibid.*

²¹ Cited in *Words Apart: The Language of Prejudice*, Jonathon Green, Kyle Cathie, London, 1996. "American culture" is the "missionary position."

²² *English Traits*, 1856.

Forbidden (after 1492):

Not Everyone Can Come to America

As soon as the news of the discovery is known, the Spanish monarchs attempt to organize and arrange the travel of settlers to American lands.

First, travel is prohibited by any Jew, Arab, or Protestant — even if converted to Catholicism — unless a family tradition of several generations in the Catholic church is confirmed. This prohibition extends to gypsies and lawyers. These last, "...because their profession is considered particularly harmful, because of their influence on the Indians and colonialists, their love of lawsuits and their ability to gobble up assets and fortunes in interminable processes..."

But by the third trip there are not enough volunteers. Therefore, the monarchs issue a law of pardon to delinquents who embark. Those condemned to death expunge their sentence with two years of service in American lands, while those sentenced to prison may serve one year [abroad].

Excluded from royal pardon and therefore forbidden to travel are those condemned for heresy, treason, murder by gun or arrow; those guilty of circulating false money and taking gold or money out of the kingdom; and, finally, homosexuals.

— translated from *El Pregonero* (The Towncrier)
Washington, DC, Spanish language newspaper
October 8, 1992
re: 500th anniversary of "The Discovery"