

## The Anglo-American Paper War: Debates about the New Republic, 1800–1825

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Thomas Rodgers

Buried deep within the endnotes of Joseph Eaton's book is a wry comment on the art of reviewing by the 19th-century author Sydney Smith, 'I never read a book before reviewing it; it prejudices a man so' (p. 199, n. 32). Although a rather alarming beginning for a book review, it is an apt apophthegm for *The Anglo-American Paper War*, a study of the deliberately intemperate reading of literature produced by or about the United States of America in the formative years of the early Republic. As Eaton reveals in this well-researched book, the cut and thrust of writing and reviewing between sections of the American and British press was a literary battlefield in a wider struggle for national self-awareness. To review a work was a political act as much as a cultural one; the purpose not merely to discuss the merits of particular travel accounts, state of the nation apologetics, or reformist manifestos, but to hold up a mirror to the perils besetting the reviewer's own society.

The subtitle clearly defines the book's chronological remit, the awkward years of the post-revolutionary relationship from the presidency of Thomas Jefferson until the maturing self-confidence of American literature in the 1820s. Although much has been written on this era, especially for the bicentenary of the War of 1812, Eaton's contribution provides welcome coverage of the relatively neglected topic of Anglo-American cultural relations in the aftermath of independence. This is a rich seam for exploration and Eaton has mined the periodical literature on both sides of the Atlantic to good effect; from books, pamphlets, and periodicals he traces the presentation of the image of America, both at home and abroad. In this respect the

notion of a 'Paper War' is successful in delineating a rounded picture of the process of America's transformation from an initial period of cultural dependence upon Britain to greater self-confidence. Four case study chapters provide the specific battlefields of the war.

The first chapter, 'Travelers, Reviewers, and Jeffersonian-era America', establishes the broad intellectual context of the debate between writers and reviewers. Early travel accounts are identified as displaying the tropes of English condescension toward American manners, or more specifically the lack of them (p. 12). The book's concern is not so much with the nature of the images presented in such works, or their validity, but in their reception. President Jefferson's democratic Francophile administration alarmed not only conservative travellers, but also the now politically marginalised Anglophile Federalists; chief amongst these, Joseph Dennie of Philadelphia, editor of the monthly *Port-Folio*. Reliant on British models and contemptuous of rude manners, nevertheless, the rising hostility fomented by the treatment of American shipping forced even these writers into guarded criticism of British sneers (p. 31). Eaton argues that these developments provided the foundations of American cultural nationalism. In the second half of the chapter the focus shifts to the way British periodicals used writing on and about the United States to fight domestic battles. On the one hand Whigs and radicals looked favourably upon the republican experiment and saw lessons for reform; on the other Tories saw Federalist allies against French ideals and religious disestablishment. Eaton clarifies later that 'the Paper War cannot be understood as a binary conflict, as the most contentious debates were intra-British or between Americans' (p. 93). The domestic audience and response to the periodicals is clearly demonstrated, what is less clear is the intended effect that they were to have across the Atlantic. Items were published and republished back and forth, but it seems something of a stretch to call these early printed barbs a war.

The second and third chapters of the book are arguably the most successful in conveying the relationship between actual hostilities and literary responses; defending national honour took on renewed importance and combined with other forms of nation making. Chapter two investigates the way Charles Jared Ingersoll's *Inchiquin's Letters* (1810) precipitated a meaningful transatlantic debate about the virtues of America. Eaton highlights the regional nuances of the American response, as New England Federalists were incensed at being tarred with the same brush as the Middle and Southern states (p. 70). Chapter three is primarily concerned with the British press reaction to an experimental English settlement in south eastern Illinois. For a time its radical precepts and lure to British emigrants alarmed the Tory press, underscoring, Easton claims, 'the unease in post-war Britain and the centrality of the United States to those anxieties' (p. 98). Critics would have enjoyed the benefit of hindsight, for the settlement was an abject failure, but even then was not entirely forgotten (p. 124).

The final chapter moves past the heightened tensions of the War of 1812 to reveal the development of a more national, as opposed to regional, self-confidence about American letters, exemplified in Robert Walsh's *An Appeal from the Judgements of Great Britain Respecting the United States of America* (1819). A wide-ranging rebuttal of British calumnies, Walsh's *Appeal* attracted widespread praise (p. 141). The common enemy – Britain – had provided an Other against whom Americans could unite whatever their political persuasion. British reviewers no longer had the urge to be as critical and sought to improve ties of friendship (p. 161).

Eaton's study achieves the difficult balance of providing due weight to the internal political debates in both America and Britain. The concentration on the travel genre and the cream of the periodical literature provides a sharp focus, albeit one circumscribed by literary fame in metropolitan centres. Scholars of American nationalism and British politics will gain from a work that demonstrates the role of external examples in these debates. Yet there is a sense that Eaton rather holds back from exploring more fully the way in which this Paper War reshaped the English-speaking Atlantic World. In the acknowledgements Eaton references both the trans-Atlantic content of the book and the 'trans-Pacific dimension' of its creation (p. vii). Early on the nature of the work is identified as 'cis-Atlantic' (p. 4), but there is no explicit discussion of David Armitage's typology of Atlantic history.<sup>(1)</sup> As the book is published in the British Scholar Society's Britain and the World series the emphasis on trans-Atlantic or international history is understandable. Eaton argues that the older post Second World War historiography was too optimistic in its view of transatlantic

relations; the rancour of the Paper War demonstrating the brittle connections between the two nations (p. 5). Yet throughout the book Eaton reveals the cultural dependence of certain American writers on Britain and British literary modes; even Ingersoll's pro-American tract drew on the tradition of satire (p. 57). Equally, many British perspectives were informed by a sense that the Americans remained sympathetic to Britain (p. 40) and their interests were closely allied. Eaton's work is certainly an important addition to the growing literature on post-independence Anglo-American cultural relations, but given this is such an Atlantic World work; it would have been interesting to see a little more on the re-shaping of this world in a more self-consciously Atlantic framework. The immediate post-war Atlantic World has received insufficient attention in the literature, although P. J. Marshall's *Remaking the British Atlantic: The United States and the British Empire after American Independence* (2) is a recent remedy to this lacuna. Eaton's book adds a new dimension and a longer perspective; it will be important in any future attempt to rethink the dynamics of the English-speaking Atlantic, but there are wider connections to be made to Canada and the Caribbean in such an endeavour.

A consistent theme throughout the book is the role of slavery in these Anglo-American debates. With a rich literature on the debates over slavery in the New Republic Eaton keeps the focus specifically on the role of slavery in the polemics of the Paper War. By locating the theme of slavery within these wider debates of British or American virtues, the degree of compromise is revealed. A revealing incident on the British side is the manner in which the antislavery Henry Brougham of the *Edinburgh Review* defended American slavery from the attacks of a travel account (p. 46). Similarly, Americans downplayed their own responsibility for slavery, or presented it as unproblematic. Timothy Dwight's review of *Inchiquin's Letters* echoed the Jeffersonian notion that a slave owner could not be culpable for inheriting slaves, a fault forced on the nation by the British. Moreover, Dwight's defence had a regional dimension, absolving New England from the stain of slavery entirely (p. 89). The national purpose behind Walsh's *Appeal* overrode the author's antislavery views, or at least led him to adopt an overly-optimistic view of its future role in the United States (pp. 150–2). The combination of nationalism and moral myopia is effectively argued.

Arguably the most telling contribution of this book is in its depiction of the evolution of a certain strand of American print nationalism during the politically boisterous years of the early republic. Prevailing European attitudes and arrogance, notably the Comte du Buffon's views on the degeneracy impelled by the American climate, were particularly aggravating to a literary cadre self-conscious of the marginal position of American letters in the Atlantic World. Another callous remark by Sydney Smith from 1820, 'who reads an American book?' rankled American literary scholars long after any validity it may have had faded (p. 2). It was against this backdrop (although not the specific quote) that patriotic commentators, such as Ingersoll, praised American literary productions. Reviewing took on an urgent patriotic role, leading to overblown paeans to early works such as John Marshall's *The Life of Washington* and Joel Barlow's poem *The Columbiad* (p. 57). Eaton sustains the focus on the merits of American literature throughout the book. Whilst there was considerable anger in American periodicals over slighting British criticism, even nationalist writers were unable to point decisively to home grown talent comparable to the giants of metropolitan literature. Concluding a point made by Robert Walsh, Eaton remarks, 'British critics aside, Americans needed to be realistic. A national literature would come only after other aspects of civilization matured' (p. 134). On this point Eaton lends, perhaps, a little more weight to the pessimistic view, both of the time and in the historiography, that the United States had still not achieved its full cultural independence from Britain (p. 168). Yet in searching for the martial context of the nationalist discourse, Eaton has provided a valuable picture of the international dimensions of a developing American identity.

The *Anglo-American Paper War* provides a coherent account of the formative tussles amongst commentators on both sides of the Atlantic; it enriches understanding of the cultural development of a newly independent nation and an imperial power coming to terms with this new relationship. This focus is quite sufficient in itself, but the medium of the press invites speculation about the treatment of other formative events and problems shaping Anglo-American identities: the development of British North America, the Louisiana Purchase, and the Haitian Revolution. These may fall outside of Eaton's specific case studies, but suggest that the traffic of ideas was not simply a two-way process between Philadelphia and Boston and London and

Edinburgh. This, however, is simply a case of wanting more. Students and scholars of the early republic will find plenty to enjoy in a study which firmly locates the development of the United States in its international context.

## Notes

1. David Armitage, 'Three concepts of Atlantic history', in *The British Atlantic World, 1500–1800*, ed. David Armitage and Michael J. Braddick (Basingstoke, 2002).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. P. J. Marshall, *Remaking the British Atlantic: The United States and the British Empire after American Independence* (Oxford, 2012).[Back to \(2\)](#)

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