

Zeitschrift:	SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature
Herausgeber:	Swiss Association of University Teachers of English
Band:	14 (2002)
Artikel:	Against American exceptionalism : post-colonial perspectives on Irish immigration
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DOI:	https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-99982

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Against American Exceptionalism: Post-Colonial Perspectives on Irish Immigration

John Blair

1. American Exceptionalism as a “Foundational Myth”

There is no more persistent fantasy held by Americans about themselves and their place in the world than the belief in their exceptional (and superior) status. It begins with early colonization in New England and survives through successive avatars even up to today.¹ As in the case of the “American Innocence” analyzed by Emory Elliott at this conference, its death has been announced many times yet it is still there. Over the last half-century or so “American Exceptionalism” played a major role in the discourse of national self-congratulation in the context of the Cold War and, as a direct result, this catch phrase has remained prominent in American Studies as launched outside the USA as of mid-century.

In one sense, of course, the belief that the USA was exempt from historical European taint, for example, in extending imperial influence and control outside its boundaries, is simply ethnocentrism as usual, given that all polities generate positive self-imaging. In a more serious sense, this fond belief has discouraged Americans in general and American Studies specialists in particular from insights which clarify the functioning and the evolution of this national culture.

My goal today is to suggest how the USA, as of its independent existence, is not atypical of post-colonial nations but a central instance, perhaps

¹ As a quick example take Seymour Martin Lipset’s *American Exceptionalism* (1996). Amassing a variety of social-science evidence, mostly from comparative surveys, he shows small differences separating the USA from other Western cultures but parlays these marginal tendencies into a qualitative distinction which purports to justify his title.

even a model, in the history of modern empires. The primary signal of post-colonial orientations is the remarkably extended commitment over American time, among the elites that long dominated national life, to anglophilic or at the very least anglocentrism.

2. "Post-colonial" perspectives in American Studies generally

In American Studies conducted in the USA, post-colonial concepts have been largely co-opted on behalf of minorities, especially Indians, Blacks and Hispanics, who can readily be seen as victims of internal colonization over American time. This approach has the advantage of undermining the notion that American exploitation of underlings is in any significant way exceptional just because its overseas empire only emerged as of late in the nineteenth century. Perhaps in the late twentieth century it seems more readily credible (or more politically correct) to identify the USA among the colonizers. Certainly the USA differs from former colonies around the world, notably in Asia and Africa, in which large indigenous populations found ways to resist or accommodate colonial disruptions of their traditional cultures. Nonetheless post-colonial concepts have a mainline application to the USA that has remained largely unexplored.

The Empire Writes Back (Ashcroft 1989), one of the ur-texts of post-colonial studies, does acknowledge from the outset that the USA is susceptible to analysis as a post-colonial culture², but it performs such an analysis only sporadically, and even in those moments, as we will see shortly, often reads phenomena unconvincingly. My primary concern today is to sketch out how post-colonial concepts apply in remarkably central ways to the history and culture of the USA from its late eighteenth-century independence until well after World War II.

3. "Post-colonial" perspectives reconfigured for mainstream insights

In former colonies one cultural phenomenon seems to be universally observable: the local elites which tend to dominate once the colonial masters have

² The remark is phrased more precisely in terms of literature: "In many ways the American experience and its attempts to produce a new kind of literature can be seen as the model for all later post-colonial writing." (17).

left usually have reached their eminence through cooperation with or at least imitation of the practices and values of the colonizer. Even in the midst of politically charged rhetorics of independence these elites tend to prolong the colonizers' view of the world, sometimes for a very long time more appropriately counted in centuries than in decades.

One might be tempted to see the newly independent Americans of the late eighteenth century as English provincials ready to remain substantially loyal to the values of their metropolitan origins. It is true that roughly half of the population counted in the 1790 census was either English or Welsh in origin, but substantial numbers, especially in New England, had long maintained only selective loyalty to dominant English values and practices. The War of Independence in fact drove the most loyal "Englishmen" into exile. Political independence was followed by strenuous efforts toward economic independence, accompanied by reiterated declarations of cultural independence. Nonetheless the status-laden values guiding the most influential Americans continued to be recognizably derived from those of the former colonial masters, those which continued to define what "civilized" meant.

4. The Anglophilic American WASPs and their hegemony

The elites who dominated American life after 1790 were, with rare exceptions like that prototypical Francophile, Thomas Jefferson, steady enforcers of English attitudes and values. American social life was in this sense dominated by anglocentrism all through the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, indeed until after World War Two. Literature proved to be one cultural domain particularly sensitive to pressures associated with anglophilic and resistance to it.

The standard view of American literary independence is that it was strenuously fought for and finally achieved in the course of the nineteenth century. To keep the degree of this independence in perspective it suffices to note that all during the century popular English authors were lionized when and if they visited the USA, whereas even the best American writers were lucky if they were read receptively in England, let alone valued. The complex situation facing the would-be American authors was succinctly articulated by Robert Weisbuch in *Atlantic Double-Cross* (1986). "American writers required of themselves literary qualities that would set their works apart from European and particularly from English literary models. The British told them over and over again that they would fail in this endeavor

because America lacked a sufficiently full history" (xiii). Small wonder that for Americans in general, as Weisbuch puts it, "Europe often reduces to England despite all Germanic influences" (xvii).

Even the very nineteenth-century writers who were strenuously advocating an independent American literature often traveled to England and wrote out their complex responses as what Donald Ross appropriately identifies as "post-colonial subjects." These travels yielded texts over which the writers worried a good deal about tone and cultural critique since they wanted to assure sales in Britain as well as the USA.³ Prominent examples: Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Margaret Fuller, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Bayard Taylor. To this list should be added Washington Irving and James Fenimore Cooper, though the latter ranged more widely in Europe than was common before the Civil War. After 1865 Mark Twain's *Innocents Abroad* (1867) signals a broadening of touristic interests beyond Britain and the Holy Land to include the Continent of Europe, but England remained the touchstone destination for Americans wealthy enough to travel back to the Old World. Those well-to-do Americans who stayed at home found dominantly English models of taste guiding the new American institutions of high culture, such as lending libraries, museums, symphony orchestras, operas, ballets, art collections and the like. There were, of course, some notable exceptions as in the dominance of Paris fashions for women.

In the context of American post-colonial culture the academic study of literature needs to be distinguished from the evolution of literary texts themselves. From its beginnings in England in the later nineteenth century, the study of national literature in English on both sides of the Atlantic was ethnocentric, that is, anglocentric. Even when Matthew Arnold claimed to be identifying "the best that was thought and said in the world" (*Culture and Anarchy*), it turned out to be dominantly English plus a smattering of German (but not French) contributions.

Masking anglocentrism in a vocabulary of universality did not end with Matthew Arnold. The American "New Critics" as of their emergence in the 1930s were notable anglophiles. Here I differ with the authors of *The Empire Writes Back*, who read the New Criticism as *post-colonial* in the sense of "allowing post-colonial writers [read, *American*], whose traditions were by European definitions 'childish,' 'immature,' or 'tributary' (to adopt the most

³ See www.english.upenn.edu/Travel99/Abstract/ross.html (2000.11.09).

favoured metaphors of the period), into the English canon, which by the 1960s was in dire need of fresh fodder" (160). This remark is itself excessively anglocentric in that it ignores the persistent valuing of the "Great Tradition" in American academic circles long after the advent of the New Critics on the American scene, which took place, of course, long before the 1960s.

The formalism of the New Critics did lead them to focus on individual works taken one at a time, hence to turn attention away from traditions as such, but the potential broadening of literary acceptability was from the outset limited by their loyalty to the canonical. The most influential New Critics came to their formalist vocabulary of universal aesthetic values out of a turn to England as an alternative to corrupting industrial values identified with the American North. Though many of these critics lived in the North and often, like Cleanth Brooks, taught in Yankee universities, their primary value orientations were to be found in their Jeffersonian, agrarian, and, though never identified as such, "post-Confederate" heritage, particularly associated with Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee, as of the 1920s. In addition a significant number of these individuals were Episcopalians in religion, that is, adherents of the American offshoot of the Church of England. Along with Lionel Trilling they implicitly respected Matthew Arnold as a model for elucidating literary taste along moral lines, whence such touchstone vocabulary as "tragic" (especially between the two wars) and later "ironic." These ostensibly aesthetic values served, among other purposes, to downgrade works from the American tradition as insufficiently complex, until, that is, an expatriate American anglophile named T.S. Eliot gave them a model for a respectably complex mode we know as Modernism.

The anglophilia of the originators of the New Criticism is explicit and unmistakable, notably in their 1930 manifesto volume entitled *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*. John Crowe Ransom, for example, in his lead essay "Reconstructed But Unregenerate," says: "England was actually the model employed by the [Old] South, in so far as Southern culture was not quite indigenous [indeed not QUITE]. And there is in the South even today an Anglophile sentiment quite anomalous in the American scene" (3). If this anglophilia seemed atypical of American culture as a whole, that was flagrantly not the case in academic circles.

Under the influence of the New Criticism, even in its conflict with older and more blatantly anglocentric models of literary scholarship, the anglophilia of American English Departments was remarkable even after World War Two, perhaps most persistently in the elite Ivy League Universities. At

Brown University in the mid-1950s I was one of the first small group of English majors who were allowed to concentrate in American Literature Honors. The two innovative young professors who launched the program received grudging authorization from the Department on condition that they would teach the necessary courses for the first year or two in addition to their regular assignments. Admittedly humanities departments at Ivy League Universities tend even now to flaunt conservatism as a badge of honor, but the point is to show how very late could come an American academic acceptance of American literary legitimacy.

In other domains as well the Ivy League Universities served until well after World War Two as bastions of White Anglo-Saxon Protestant privilege. A telling example is the US Foreign Service, for which, until into the 1960s, graduation from Harvard, Yale or Princeton was a virtual, if unstated, necessity. Only as of the mid-1960s does the Foreign Service, through its entrance examinations, begin to function as the meritocracy it had long claimed to be.⁴ That change marks the effective end of anglocentric WASP hegemony in an internationally visible domain of American life.

I have concerned myself with cultural matters to the exclusion of politics, but some attention in that direction seems appropriate since this domain has had a palpable effect on how relations between the USA and the UK have been conceptualized over time. John E. Moser has recently catalogued the extent of American anglophobia in politics from roughly 1918 through 1946, a phenomenon that might seem at first glance to negate my thesis here. What he finds, however, is predominantly a public rhetoric which, at the shifting convenience of the politician in question, aims criticism less at England than at the British Empire, opposing any use of American resources to prop up its “illegitimate” existence. It is startling to learn that such rhetoric even greeted Winston Churchill’s classic “Iron Curtain” speech in Missouri in 1946, though by 1947 and the Truman Doctrine the USA had moved fully into Cold War mode. From that time on American political rhetoric emphasized the “special relationship” between the two powers.

For the moment I want to illustrate how, even between the two wars, when isolationist attacks on the British Empire were common, American elites continued to offer cultural homage to England as locus of the values that defined civilization. Even as late as the boom of the 1920s many newly

⁴ Still later, as of the early 1980s, the Foreign Service began to integrate affirmative-action principles into its selection process, giving points not only for veterans but also for women and minorities.

rich Northern industrialists continued their obeisance to English models in the way they spent their new fortunes. As a single example, I take Meadow Brook Hall in Oakland County just north of Detroit where Matilda Dodge Wilson, widow of John Dodge and as heiress to his automobile fortune one of the richest women in the USA, marrying a lumber magnate, proceeded between 1926 and 1929 to build a 110-room Tudor Mansion House sure to be *proper* by moduling together a series of rooms legitimated by imitation of traditional English aristocratic originals (a Blenheim Room, a Hampton Court Room, etc.).⁵ Once again, the survival is remarkable for its lateness in time.

5. The Melting Pot metaphor as anglocentrism

What is at issue here are not just the conceptions prevailing in the upper and the aspiring classes in the USA, but the central conception of the USA which these hegemonic groups made every effort to seem natural and inescapable for all Americans, notably the image of the USA as a melting pot which would accept immigrants from just about anywhere, albeit with selective reluctance in some instances. Their expectation was that assimilation would transform the newcomers into something “new” and “American.” What no one ever admitted – or perhaps rarely even recognized until recent years – was that what was supposed to melt was everything that was incompatible with values modeled on the British ruling class.

The currency and credibility of the *melting pot* as a metaphor for American self-definition handily defines the outer limits in time of the anglocentric hegemony I am describing. Crevecoeur, in his *Letters from an American Farmer* in the 1780s is the first, as far as I know, to employ the adjective “melting” (Letter III) to the process whereby diverse Europeans become that “new race” known as Americans. The “pot” is only added much later with Israel Zangwill’s play by that name shortly after 1900. The play was popular partly because its title provided a graphic metaphor for an understanding that had been so widely held for so long as to constitute conventional wisdom. The melting pot idea, however, was always taken with a variety of unspoken provisos which only surfaced in the 1960s and 1970s when it irreversibly lost its credibility for significant numbers of Americans. Taken out of its Ameri-

⁵ See www.meadowbrookhall.org/about.htm.

can context, the “melting pot” would seem to imply that diverse human characteristics would be added to the pot and then all would be melted down into a homogeneous fluid entity to be thought of as *American*.

In context, however, the idea was NOT that all differences would be melted away to form a “New American Man” because Crevecoeur’s original idea never functioned that way. Instead the metaphor covertly called for the melting away of any and all immigrant tendencies which varied from the Anglophilic ideal. When in the late nineteenth century the flow of immigrants grew so large and so diverse as to threaten that project, established Americans were quick to organize anti-immigrant groups such as the Midwest’s American Protective Association (1887) and the American Patriotic Association (1890s), or the Boston elite’s Immigration Restriction League (1894).

In recent decades, as the idea of any American centrality whatsoever has come under increasing pressure, the melting pot has been debunked as the sham and delusion it always was. It has not been supplanted by a comparable metaphor but unstably by several attempts to codify difference and diversity as the *American* essence: the salad bowl, the mosaic, the kaleidoscope, all of which carry diverse but fatal flaws as metaphors for national self-definition. The components of a salad may maintain their distinct textures and flavors but the whole decays with disturbing rapidity. A mosaic has the remarkably relevant characteristic of remaining visually obscure until one stands at a certain distance from it, but, alas, it remains always the same whereas neither progressives nor conservatives in the USA are content with the status quo. A kaleidoscope is admirably mobile but lacks sufficient stability to image credibly a nation.

Multiculturalism is the loose term that has gained in credibility in recent American time, but it is overly abstract, lacking precisely in the concrete imagistic qualities that helped make the melting pot idea viable for such a long time. There is room here for anyone interested in United States culture to invent a better metaphor. The cultural need is palpable, the demand assured!

6. Differential welcome of immigrants: the Irish as a special case

In the context of comparative culture studies, my primary concern in recent years, the best way to measure the presence of an intangible such as an anglocentric mindset is by zeroing in on circumstances under which it performs

cultural work, that is, palpably affects the ideas and actions of substantial numbers of human individuals. In the present context I find it helpful to differentiate among the welcome awaiting different groups of immigrants to the USA from various origins, particularly during the nineteenth century. Late in that century the hostility to immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe is legendary on the part of established American nativists, but the Know-Nothing Party of the 1850s came into existence in primary hostility to Irish immigrants, who share few of the obvious disabilities of distance in language and culture from the established Americans. It is true that the Irish driven from their homes by the Great Famine of the late 1840s were among the poorest and least educated of the Irish, but the great majority of them spoke English, which ought to have facilitated their entry into American life. Of course, most as of the 1840s were Roman Catholics, entering into a hostilely Protestant world, particularly fraught in Boston and in New England generally. On the other hand, massive immigration somewhat later of other Roman Catholics from Poland and Italy did not elicit signs of the kind that greeted the Irish in New York as of the middle 1850s: *Help Wanted NINA* (No Irish Need Apply).

I believe that the Irish were particularly targeted as unassimilable because the elites who dominated American life in the nineteenth century took over lock, stock and barrel the anti-Irish stereotypes that had dominated English conceptions for centuries. The roots of anti-Irish stereotypes in England go back a long way, perhaps even to William of Malmesbury early in the 12th century, who is already asserting a distinction between civil and savage peoples. By the end of that century Giraldus Cambrensis is explicitly condemning the Irish as savages. Among other things, "he complains that the Irish have no culture, that they live like beasts, that they are neither tillers nor miners of the soil but nomads, that they are lazy and addicted to liberty, that they are barely Christian, that they are addicted to bestiality and incest, that they are given to treachery and trickery" (Morgan 24). Giraldus is then cited regularly whenever the English need to justify yet another military expedition against Ireland: in the time of Elizabeth I or Oliver Cromwell or the ongoing later rebellions.

In Victorian times Giraldus was still being cited as an authority on Ireland by John Beddoe, the chief fomenter of racial stereotypes in the guise of the new "science" called physical anthropology. The agitations for home rule among the Irish, both Presbyterian (especially in 1798) and Catholic throughout the nineteenth century simply reinforced the English certainty that the Irish were uncivilizable by origin and by definition.

For the nineteenth century the best study of English and American stereotypes of the Irish is by L. Perry Curtis, Jr., notably the 1997 revised edition of *Apes and Angels: The Irishman in Victorian Caricature*. This study amply illustrates how the imagery of political and satirical cartoons moves easily back and forth across the Atlantic because there was so little difference between American and English caricatures of "Paddy," the simian subhuman Irishman who was both incapable and unworthy of being taken seriously as a human being.⁶

The American spin on the reigning stereotypes was to associate the Irish with blacks at the bottom of the social scale. More precisely, as Richard Williams points out in his economic assessment of the status of blacks and Irish in the nineteenth-century USA, blacks were the sole occupants of the unskilled/unfree labor slot whereas the Irish were assigned the bottom unskilled slot on the free/White scale. From the point of view of economic structures racism and ethnicity were cultural categories that justified the lowly placement of both groups on their respective scales with religious categories serving to justify hostility in both cases (the blacks as "heathen," the Irish as Roman Catholic). Especially before the Civil War negative stereotypes commonly did not bother to differentiate clearly between blacks and Irish.

Ironically, however, it was almost exclusively Irish performers who created the new American entertainment form that by the middle of the nineteenth century codified new and long-lasting racial stereotypes in blackface minstrels, which assured that even free blacks could be dismissed as bumbling Jim Crows or hopelessly pretentious Zip Coons (see Blair 1990).

As influential Irish-Americans realized after a time, they as a group needed to distance themselves from blacks in order to diminish the distance white elites perceived between themselves and the Irish. As an additional help the end of the century saw new immigrant groups moving in to occupy the bottom of the labor hierarchy. The result was a progressive assertion of something that on the face of it would seem unnecessary, the whiteness of the Irish. The story for the Philadelphia area is well told in Noel Ignatiev's *How the Irish Became White* (1995). The very need for this adaptation is further evidence for the extraordinary scorn visited upon the Irish by the

⁶ The first edition of Curtis' book elicited objections from some English apologists like Sheridan Gilley, who wants to claim importance for some compensatingly positive English stereotypes of a "good-natured Paddy" (82). Curtis' second edition seems to me definitive in showing the dominance of negative Irish images.

dominant white Anglo-Saxon Protestant Americans, who furthered their own interests by unselfcritically applying the venerable English anti-Irish stereotypes.

7. A contrasting case: the Irish in Argentina

Other evidence exists to confirm that the American unwelcome of the Irish had less to do with the Irish themselves than with the mentality which greeted them, namely in Irish immigration to Argentina, a country substantially outside British influence. Here the Irish were welcomed, before, during and after the Great Famine, not particularly because they were Catholic, but because they knew cattle and sheep and worked effectively to settle the Pampas as these grazing plains were progressively taken from the Indians during the nineteenth century. Partly through the efforts of Father Anthony Fahy during the middle decades of that century, the Irish established patterns that allowed them to maintain a remarkably stable and self-reproducing community till after World War II when the Peron administration enforced ethnic integration for the first time. Under Fahy's guidance, the Irish who made money share-herding sheep or cattle could safely bank their savings with him, generating a capital base he could use to stake still other Irish out on the "camp."⁷ He maintained supplies of priests from Ireland as well as organizing fresh immigration including women who were encouraged to marry in-group. I am in touch with one family that first arrived in Argentina in 1848 but whose members only learned Spanish as of the middle of this century, a reminder of how unlike the USA immigration experiences could be in different parts of the Americas.

The experience of the Argentine Irish makes it clear by negation how powerful was the cultural work (read demonization) performed by the exportation of English anti-Irish stereotypes. Outside the British Empire, where these stereotypes had no colonialist hold on local mentalities, Irish immigrants were not only accepted but welcomed, in part because they were very largely English speaking.⁸

⁷ See Patrick McKenna, "Irish Emigration to Argentina: A Different Model," in Bielenberg, 195-212, esp. 203-08.

⁸ Emigrants at the time of the Great Famine are widely supposed to include large numbers who spoke only Irish and no English, but Donald Harman Akenson in *Small Differences*, Appendix

8. Reflections on Comparative Culture Studies as American Studies

As an exercise in Comparative Culture Studies, today's undertaking can serve to emphasize a few general observations:

For any such project "culture" as an analytical category requires relevant definition and perhaps even redefinition. Its usage is plagued by long-standing confusions between "high culture" and a more anthropological sense of the whole way of life of a people. To be clear one must specify which domains of culture are at issue. Here I have looked primarily at literature, at the academic study of literature, and at social life in the sense of the hegemonic values that guide the behavior of those on the make, including their attitudes toward immigrants. Other domains of American culture, such as politics, show different post-colonial orientations. Though totalizing generalizations may not be possible, generalizing within clearly defined limits is still indispensable to American Studies, particularly those carried on outside the USA.

Comparative culture studies are themselves promoted by and contribute to the increasing internationalization of American Studies. This project originated in 1998 in Dakar when I addressed issues of American immigration for West African Americanists who work these days primarily with post-colonial concepts. On reflection I discovered unexpected applications of such concepts to the USA, none of which was suggested by American Studies usage in the USA. Comparisons which cross cultural boundaries may be more likely to yield credible insights into American practice than those which remain within that single national frame, but it is not possible to foresee in advance which comparisons will reveal crucial evidence. At the outset I had no idea that Irish immigration to Argentina would have any relevance at all to this project. Comparative culture studies are multilateral and open-ended by nature.

The goal remains habitual for American Studies: an understanding of the USA and its culture that avoids received preconceptions and/or hypocrisies. Comparative Culture Studies provides fresh conceptual means of clarifying complex cultural phenomena, not just in the USA but potentially, once one learns how to deploy its tools, anywhere in the world.

Q, shows that around mid-century the percentage of the population that spoke only Irish was only about 5 per cent.

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