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Making Myths about the 'Merrikins: Imagining American Ingenuity in the Jacksonian Era

Inger H. Dalsgaard

Long suffering of sea-sickness sprightly described, considerable railwaying, horror at tobacco, awe at Niagara, and Lo! an English work upon the United States of America.

When the United States and Europe are compared, especially concerning attitudes to technology, a simple equation seems frequently in operation: the New World welcomes innovation, mechanical and material, where the Old World views any departure from the tried and tested with deep suspicion or even fear.

We still sustain the belief that Americans invented, embraced and then mass-produced every important bit of machinery in the last century and a half, and with respect to their technology – as with many other aspects of their existence – Americans may also seem to Europeans simultaneously idealistic and materialistic, especially at times when their naive belief in a technological fix to technologically created problems is stronger than ours. As this paper was being written, a very up-to-date example presented itself in the mutually exclusive but equally "American" stances taken by Democrat and Republican spokespersons over the proposal manually to recount ballots already counted by machines: Democrats argued in favour with reference to the right to equality of each individual American, or Floridian voter, at least, while Republicans asserted the unreliability of subjective human beings in comparison to the infallibility or objective correctness achieved only by a fully electro-mechanical count. Obviously, both camps were appealing to well-rehearsed rhetorical stances, myths even, of what makes an American what he or she is. As often before, technology as well as liberty lurk near the surface.

Europe has long been a vantage point as well as a disadvantage point from which to observe and assess views on politics or technology in the United States. Observations by writers of government reports, private diaries or published travelogues preceding those by academics of European American studies associations, form a body of evidence on which we have to rely, but also one towards which we have reasons to be suspicious since it may still subtly influence our contemplation of "Americanness" today.

Our perception of American technophilia must have originated both from a difference in actual technological development, and a difference in acceptance of implementation strategies – e.g. in the strategies for proliferation of railroads in the States – for historical reasons, but also, I would argue, in the actual reporting of these differences. Circulated in print, such observations of difference gained a self-reinforcing nature and have helped enhance and maintain them in the popular imagination on both sides of the Atlantic as fundamental. While once popular publications by foreign tourists, who had a profit motive for pointing out differences, have faded from memory their legacy is a prevailing perception of comparatively higher levels of enthusiasm for and willingness to adopt technologies early in the United States and to trust them to be steps towards inevitable progress.

Reports on political, economic and industrial peculiarities, especially by British visitors to the United States in the first half of the nineteenth century, forced Americans to see themselves in a particular, critical light. More or less hostile travelogues became part of a booming market in the Jacksonian era when upward of "two hundred books of travels by British writers appeared in England between 1815 and the Civil War, as American travels became a familiar, and profitable, literary trope" (Bradbury, 87). And these books were devoured on both sides of the Atlantic, helping shape the sometimes re-active, other times reflexive self-perception of Americans as I shall try to exemplify. Travelling became not just the subject for the travelogue but an image of, metaphor for, or foundational myth about the American character. Early European travel-writing, I suggest, became a location of the production or reinforcement of myths about what the USA is, in relation to technology, even today.

Before describing outside sources of reevaluation, it must be said that receptivity towards the creation of certain foundational technology myths had emerged within the USA also. In the Jacksonian era, decades after the Revolution and the emergence of a republican identity, modernising politicians were labouring to tie American society to industrialisation in the new century. Promises of wealth through industrialisation replaced the agricultural values which had underpinned ideas of American republican values.

The Jacksonian era saw a "commercialization of both city and country side" as the market revolution, according to Wilentz, "brought substantial material benefits to most Northeasterners, urban and rural" (64). Hamilton's 1891 vision of financial and political independence through industrialisation, set out in his report on manufactures to Congress, seemed to be fulfilled (Licht 14). When American railroad companies closed the "steam train gap" in 1830 and superseded the English rate of expansion, transportation became another capitalist strategy speeding the marginalisation of the yeoman farmer (and with him, Jeffersonian ideals of the foundation of American Democracy). As John Kasson has suggested developments within political and economic ideologies in this era necessitated a redefinition of American foundational myths to include technology – whether in the form of improved transportation or of industrialisation, protestant work ethic and new capitalist ideas.

Positive attitudes to technology were promoted from within the United States, to the point where voices of confusion and resistance are now forgotten. Factories and trains were not in fact met with immediate enthusiasm from all quarters in the populace. In the eighteen-thirties clergy preached against "the menace of railways" and there were fears for people's mental health if they were subject to the incredible speeds of up to 15 miles an hour by steam locomotive. Arguments against railroads were also pushed by canal investors who were losing out on trade routes (Stover 16). However, since transportation was deemed important to the forward movement of the nation ways were found to support the connection between the celebration of national identity and technology. The Ohio Canal was, for instance, inaugurated on Independence Day in 1828 in the presence of President John Quincy Adams. On the same day work on the B&O railroad was commenced, with the blessings of the last living signer of the Declaration of Independence, Charles Caroll, who considered the inauguration of this first railroad scarcely second to that other important act of his. It has to be said that when speaking these words he was also a director of the railroad and had a financial as well as national agenda (Nye 49). Technologies of transport became vehicles for the conscious creation of foundational myths through civil religion. The rhetoric of national progress was significant as private, public and political interests blended. America may well have hosted unprecedented technological enthusiasm and initiative for most of the nineteenth century very much because of the conviction (promoted by national and capitalist interests) that technological progress was the best, or only, way for the newly independent nation to prosper in the world and a way the United States had to follow at any cost. But though English people saw the effects and could imagine causes, few managed to be as convinced by the success of this strategy

for the new republic as Americans themselves had reason to be. Many voiced their scepticism and asserted categorical differences in attitudes between nationalities, often in the guise of criticising American domestic manners rather than the American system of domestic manufacture.

The early republic received writing guests from the Old World, many of whom made the journey to evaluate the success of post-revolution democratic institutions of the New World – Frances Wright's *Views of Society and Manners in America* (1821) and Harriet Martineau's *Society in America* (1837) being examples of early "ethnography" – *The Edinburgh Review* amongst other publications had declared America "to be the land of the future, 'emphatically the New World'" formulating early expectations of (positive) differences (Wright 15). The late 1820s saw a new climate in politics and travel writing: "the aggressive, populist, egalitarian age of Jacksonian democracy" (Bradbury 90). While Alexis de Tocqueville could still consider equality and the "sovereignty of the people" essential to American populism, for better or worse, British authors writing about their experience of the States in the 1830s were also increasingly aggressive in their vocal disappointment in the state and influence of America's brand of democracy (Bradbury 91). The epitome of disappointment may be Fanny Trollope's venomous *Domestic Manners of the Americans* (1832). Trollope claimed that personal and social manners of Americans were so disgusting and their steam boats so cramped that rather than being confined in one she would "infinitely prefer sharing the apartment with a party of well-conditioned pigs" (12). The extent of the insult was well-researched since Cincinnati, where she had failed to strike it rich selling trinkets to the native pig merchants, was known as the "Porkopolis" of America. Trollope inaugurated a style of writing which succeeded both *in* being and *by* being insulting toward its subject. Her book was preceded by other unflattering publications (e.g. Capt. Basil Hall's *Travels in North America in the Years 1827 and 1828*) but set new standards for condescension. Captain Marryat's *A Diary in America* (1839) and Charles Dickens' *American Notes* (1842) came under attack both for living up to and failing these standards (*Quarterly Review* 505).

Travel descriptions were often published as "diaries," a literary form which seemingly reveals to the reader, in confidence, the private contempt for Americans which the well-behaved guest had kept hidden from his or her host. Peter Conrad emphasises the disappointment of British novelists in the potential of the United States as inspiration for good literary output but bad literature actually made good money for many of these thwarted novelists (and many amateurs too): the obstacles themselves becoming the subject of a successful literary genre. While ingenious English writers habitually deplored the impor-

tance of the Almighty Dollar to the brave New World, their literary material encouraged them towards innovation, which paid off in book-sales. They turned stock journey(man)-tales into tales of obsession with greed and speed, fuelled by technology. They no longer blamed a backward recent colony for sea-sickness and bumpy coach rides but co-operated in the making of the myth of American ingenuity – only to blame the USA for exploding steamboats and dangerously fast railroad engines. Opinion shapers on both sides of the Atlantic thus supported the undeniable technological head start the USA had gained but differed as to whether ingenuity was a good or bad feature of the American identity.

Many writers attacked what they believed to be central or even essential features of the American character, the "Go Ahead" or progress fixation and the orientation towards profit, the "Almighty Dollar": both of which could be found illustrated easily in the modes of transportation which authors used to get around their host country. This is ironic because their literary activities were arguably fuelled by and dependent on the very same features. Bradbury writes that "despite the difficulties of travel, European visitors were soon travelling in significant quantities to post-Revolutionary America. Many had access to a publisher, and books about the American tour became a staple of the market" (87). But rather than "despite" I would say that it was to a degree "because" of the difficulties of travel that some of these books had a market, and that part of the point many made about manners and attitudes, even about the American character, was predicated on the way in which travel became more than a method of transportation but also seemed to convey facts about the essence of American society or nature. The extent, speed and cheapness of steam travel in the US are what allow writers to get near their subject, America, and at times the vehicle becomes the subject itself. The train is thus both access to, metaphor for and the soul of the United States in some narratives of this period.

It is only natural that a travelogue comes, to some extent, to deal with the subject of travel or the modes of transportation encountered on the author's journey. But texts from this period compare, for instance, differing layouts of American to British rail carriages and find not a mere divergence of traditions within technical design but perfect models of innate social values in their respective countries. British compartmentalisation and American open-plan carriages were seen instead as confirming ideas of class versus equality or cool reserve versus over-familiarity and so forth. Unsafe, draughty, noisy and other adjectives came to signify beyond mere design flaws to include social manners in the British vocabulary, where Americans read their rolling stock as exemplary of equality, progress and courteousness.

Marryat first claimed that "'Go Ahead' is the motto of the country; both sexes join in the cry; and they do go ahead - *that's a fact!*" (Marryat 371). Americans were portrayed as a "Go Ahead" nation; a people as daring as their vehicles, which were faster and more risky than those Europeans knew from the Old World. Speed was prized and even priced: Marryat comments on the appreciation and high prices paid in New York for fast horses and the fact that the post office timed its drivers "if he is beyond his time, the driver is mulcted by the proprietors; and when dollars are in the question, there is an end to all urbanity and civility" (364-5). Both Marryat and Dickens believed that America's youth as a nation lay behind its reckless "teenage" behaviour – making it a "Go Ahead" nation where time was money and speed desirable at any cost – when they observed trains speeding through small communities without protective fencing while young Americans seemed oblivious to the dangers (Dickens 178). Marryat explained that "one great cause of disasters is that the railroads are not fenced on the sides so as to keep the cattle off them . . . as they are very partial to taking their naps on the roads. . . . It is impossible to say how many cows have been cut into atoms by the trains of America, but the frequent accidents . . . have occasioned Americans to invent a sort of shovel, attached to the front of the locomotive, which takes up a cow, tossing her off right or left" (368-9). Marryat is here both invoking the enduring myths of Yankee ingenuity and the belief in the technological fix which protects the more valuable of the two – ruminating cow and iron horse. Statistical evidence of the extreme danger to humans of the American approach to mechanised transport Marryat finds "in a periodical which I read in America" which set fatalities at 1,750 for one year (Marryat 372). Proof of this dubious kind came from within and without America, and translations of essays and republication of journal articles on either side of the Atlantic honed perceptions of the differences of the Old and New Worlds in dealing with technology.

Reports in Britain from concerned American institutions and publications enhanced such myths, even when they were addressing technological problems to solve them. The *London Mechanics' Magazine* reported on the Franklin Institute's attempts to find a solution to the explosion of steam boilers in 1830 when the increase in accidents was coming to their attention suggested readers contribute with information about "any explosion which may have occurred in your vicinity" to help analyse the causes of the problem and find solutions. The tone is suggestive as they stress that steam boats have been in use in "so vast a country as ours during a period of upwards of twenty years" puts observations into perspective (for technology this is a long history in a nation which has such a notoriously short history) and moreover they hoped the solution would be

found "without undue interference with the rights of individuals, or with the freedom of commerce and industry" (14): a definition of liberty to be expected, perhaps, from an organisation "for the promotion of the mechanic arts." An enduring European myth which may be laid squarely at travel writers' feet is this idea that Americans, in spite of such evidence as the call for a solution by the venerable institutions of America, are fundamentally uncritical towards technology and therefore also greater risk-takers than Europeans. Since travel writers conveyed this idea ahistorically without grounding and explanation in specific circumstances at the time, it also travels and transfers easily to a particular "American" relationship with accelerating progress technologies of today: one example being the aptly named information super-highway.

Michel Chevalier, who was sent by the French minister for the interior, Thiers, to inspect public works between 1834 and 36, perhaps unites the concerns for safety, the American attitude to technology and to politics best when he writes about accidents on Western Steamboats – the frequency of which caused foreign travellers and American societies such as the Franklin Institute concern. Suggesting that provisions or legislation similar to those in France ought to be passed Chevalier resigns: "Public opinion would not permit Congress to meddle with the matter and the cry of Federal encroachment on State rights would be raised at once" (221). So while there were reasons why Jacksonians backed down from internal improvements, the focus is diffused and a general (popular) outcry against interference is implied to protect the interest of private operators of steam boats. No machine inspections or licensing of competent engineers seem in place at the time of Chevalier's visit and he states that only Louisiana has a law, all be it a defective one, which "provides for the punishment of the captain on board whose steam boat an accident happens, with a special penalty in case he be engaged in a game of hazard, at the time of the accident" (221). Chevalier reflects indirectly another American standpoint than the obvious anti-federalist one: the willingness to blame individual stokers or captains solely for accidents. Irresponsibility could be blamed on human error rather than faulty technology or the laws of capitalism and fits emerging Whig policies which blamed poverty and inequality on "individual moral failings, not [on] . . . any flaws in existing political or economic structures" (Wilentz 78). Here is an example that at least one foreign observer was dimly aware of a political motive pertinent to the way in which steamboat operators were allowed to run their businesses, but even Chevalier conveys the American willingness to blame individuals for blow-ups.

British travel writers, when not mired in commentary on the spitting habits of members of Congress, rarely stood back and reflected on the ways in which

American attitudes to technology were actively formed by other influences than some innate characteristic. Often a direct link between United States citizens and technology was assumed, which ignored political stances and business interests. It is striking to notice the way in which steam boats and trains (to a higher degree than the formal institutions people like Dickens visited) also became symbolic of the progress orientation and materialism which ostensibly lead to shoddy technological solutions, i.e. trains not built to last and boats which exploded because machinery was mismanaged to achieve optimal speed at the expense of human life (Marryat 371). Carelessness was a result of the low production values of rolling stock itself – a side-effect, in part, of building to be superseded instead of building to last – but building "disposable" trains and driving them very fast was not as inherently senseless as British observers would have their audiences believe. Even those writers who suspected a capitalist motive behind dangerous risk-taking rarely understood or explicated it as an inherent part of a rational calculation of cost benefits. Casual observers, however, tended to interpret the risks operators and passengers took on, while engineers and manufacturers were coming up with better designs, in terms of emotional or mental differences between Old and New Worlders and not as end-results of rational or intellectual thought processes originating partly in Congress. Profit-seeking and contempt of safety were individualised or essentialised to the ignorance or competitiveness of stokers or, occasionally, attributed to the fact that owners sought to increase their profit margin by pushing technology ahead at a breakneck speed.

Foreign travel writers often produced criticism which was taken to heart or found offensive by their, secondary, American audience but without providing any deep analysis of the causes of the problem. If these writers treated their subject, America and its people, with ignorance or a keen eye on profit equal to that of the careless rail operators they depended on for inspiration, their superficiality was often matched in the defence mounted by Americans who played back the received image at its makers and accused them of jealousy, as we shall see later. What many foreign writers were indeed guilty of was maintaining a superior stance on American strategies on rolling stock while taking onboard the principle of disposable material in times of rapid progress and mass production: many books on the United States were written not to last but to be superseded by the next best-seller with the very "American" rationale that quality in production is a waste of resources when a new design will be rolling down the line soon enough.

It is no coincidence that one of the better writers in this new genre was also one of the few who also turned the tables on the British and pointed out that the

ruthless profit making worked for visiting writers as well as rail operators. Tony Weller in *Pickwick Papers* (1836-7) advises Mr Pickwick to escape Mrs Bardell by going to America "and then let him come back and write a book about the 'Merrikins as 'll pay all his expenses and more if he blows 'em up enough" (Bradbury 94). Blowing up the Merrikins obviously referred to enhancing the traits which would earn money but also implicitly at the time Dickens wrote this refers to the "blowing up" which had become profligate in steam boats etc. (and which he acknowledges personally in 1842). In *American Notes* Dickens is being dramatic about the train journeys and worried about the way the American Railroad progresses recklessly through the American territory, yet he remains tersely humorous, about the much publicised possibility of steamboat explosions. Going from Pittsburgh to Cincinnati in a western steamboat, *The Messenger*, Dickens muses on the dangers of travelling on a high-pressure steamboat: "As this was a steamboat journey, and western steamboats usually blow up one or two a week in the season, it was advisable to collect opinions in reference to the comparative safety of the vessels bound that way." Mr and Mrs Dickens also sought out cabins at the stern, having been warned that "'the steamboats generally blew up forward.' Nor was this an unnecessary caution, as the occurrence and circumstances of more than one such fatality during our stay sufficiently testified" (Dickens 201). It seems that, from Dickens' point of view, the level of risk involved in modern transportation was incorporated into ordinary people's normal calculations. You tried to safeguard your life by enquiring about the machine's reputation, sitting as far from it as possible and believing in your own luck. The factor of price, convenience and time, will also have helped convince people that travelling on pretty experimental steamboats or locomotives was a risk worth taking.

Americans had adored Boz and were hurt by the critical content of Charles Dickens' *American Notes for General Circulation*, which had forthwith been pirated in America upon its publication after his feted tour in 1842. *American Notes* and Capt. Marryat's *Diary in America, With Remarks On Its Institutions* (1839) which took a leaf out of Fanny Trollope's book and was met with bitter ripostes such as *Lie-ary on America* at one end of the spectrum, and at the other end, cumbersome titles like *Letter to a Lady in France, on the Supposed Failure of a National Bank, the Supposed Delinquency of the National Government, the Debts of the Several States, and Repudiations; with Answers to Enquiries Concerning the Books of Capt. Marryat and Mr. Dickens* (Anon. 1843). Dickens was also parodied, often by pen-named writers, such as "Buz!" in *Current American Notes,* An American Lady's *Change for the American Notes*, or Quarles Quickens Esq. (attributed to Poe) *English Notes, Intended for*

Very Extensive Circulation (1842). As late as 1868, when Dickens was going on a lecture tour of America it gave rise to Hans Breitman (attributed to Charles G. Leland) *Some Notes on America to be Re-written; suggested with Respect, to Charles Dickens*. Noteworthy, so to speak, is not just the extensive punning on the monetary sense of Dickens' title, but also the predominance of anonymity among the Americans replying to two of England's most popular writers.

Self-effacing humour can also be traced much later. A cartoon drawn for *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* in 1858 – "Arrowsmith's Panorama of Western Travel [Designed for Exhibition in England]" – depicted America the way Americans knew they were seen by the British. The drawings rehearse many of the staples of British travel writing and reinforce them by reflecting their reflections on American reality. A double reflection which may be meant as a joke but also reveals how well-known and incorporated these images of reckless engineers (and Cincinnati pigs) had become to American readers. Americans knew they were being constructed as well as criticised from without but the title also shows resistance, insofar as the title may refer to the Great Exhibition at Crystal Palace earlier that decade, when American ingenuity and engineering had shown itself undeniably superior to Old World technology and brought home many prizes.

British travel writing had a predominantly negative evaluation of the effectiveness of democratic institutions and the moral and cultural development of the American people and the running of their transport services, which were as under-regulated as steam boats were over-crowded and dangerous. American audiences could take the criticism to heart privately, respond with anger, hurt pride or humour in publications or insist on turning the imposed vices into a virtue by reaffirming their own advances upon the British standard of living. Simply blaming harsh criticism of their reckless progress, which was anything but wreck-less when it came to steamboats and trains, on "English jealousy" obviated the need to take the (often badly packaged) message seriously as anything other than misplaced British feelings of superiority. The fact, however, that the technological advances and ingenuity upon which the US came to pride itself had to be defended continually shows that American writers operated with the same dichotomy between doers and thinkers or science and technology which the English amongst others were holding against them. In other words, there was an agreement on who belonged on which side of the dichotomy but not on whether Americans could redefine doing and technology as high-status.

This status imbalance is still addressed and challenged by invoking the very personal emotion of jealousy. In 1999 Richard Rhodes wrote that "given the pervasiveness of the intellectual bias against technology, technologists are

probably justified in concluding that it derives in some measure from technical and scientific illiteracy as well as jealousy and competition for influence" (23). Rather than a simple vying for prestige between science and technology or jockeying for position between the Old and New Worlds, the two pairs are associated through historical development. As Herbert Hoover expressed "It was the American universities that took engineering away from the rule-of-thumb surveyors, mechanics, and Cornish foremen and lifted it into the realm of application of science. . . . The European universities did not acknowledge engineering as a profession until long after America had done so" (Rhodes 39). Hoover rightly identifies the early professionalisation and institutionalisation of the practical sciences in the US as well as invoking the progress mantra. Hoover had visited Oxford University to point out that "more than a thousand American engineers of all breeds" occupied top positions in the British Empire because instruction was not on offer at its own venerable institutions (Rhodes 39). On the ship returning to the US an "English lady of great cultivation" with whom he shared "evanescent conversation on government, national customs, literature, art, industry, and whatnot," finally asked Hoover about the nature his profession. "I replied that I was an engineer. She emitted an involuntary exclamation, and 'Why, I thought you were a gentleman!'" (Rhodes 40). The University of Oxford's interest may have been a proof Britain had started accepting that America had something of which to be jealous, but the put-down Hoover suffered in the hands of a latter-day relative of Mrs Fanny Trollope suggests that one hundred years on the virtues of engineering and progress were still vices in Europe.

At this point in time, when the USA is a postmodern society with a prominent place in the information age by virtue of its proliferation of and advances in technology, the myth established 150-200 years ago, that progress and profit – Go Ahead and the Almighty Dollar – predominated as motives for social and political development, still plays into the way Europeans may read (laxer) stands on genetically modified organisms, cloning and other technology-based science in the USA, whether or not there is any real basis for suggesting America is currently any more technologically enthusiastic or capitalist than Europe in this respect. Americans, we suspect, still see themselves in terms of ingenuity, innovation and potential. If we still consider the United States of America "to be the land of the future" the question of whether this is good or bad remains central.

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