Looming Large
America and the Late-Victorian Press, 1865-1902.

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Abstract


Widespread popular fascination with America, and an appreciation of American culture, was not introduced by Hollywood cinema during the early decades of the 20th century, but emerged during the late-Victorian period and was driven by the popular press. By the 1880s, newspaper audiences throughout the country were consuming fragments of American life and culture on an almost daily basis. Under the impulses of the so-called ‘new journalism’, representations of America appeared regularly within an eclectic range of journalistic genres, including serialised fiction, news reports, editorials, humour columns, tit-bits, and travelogues. Forms of American popular culture – such as newspaper gags – circulated throughout Britain and enjoyed a sustained presence in bestselling papers. These imported texts also acted as vessels for the importation of other elements of American culture such as the country’s distinctive slang and dialects.

This thesis argues that the late-Victorian popular press acted as the first major ‘contact zone’ between America and the British public. Chapter One tracks the growing presence of America in the Victorian press. In particular, it highlights how the expansion of the popular press, the widespread adoption of ‘scissors-and-paste’ journalism, the development of transatlantic communications networks and technologies, and a growing curiosity about life in America combined to facilitate new forms of Anglo-American cultural exchange. Chapter Two explores how the press shaped British encounters with American modernity and created a pervasive sense of a coming ‘American future’. Chapter Three focuses on the importation, circulation, and reception of American newspaper humour. Finally, Chapter Four unpacks the role played by the press in the importation, circulation, and assimilation of American slang.

It makes an original contribution to a number of academic disciplines and debates. Firstly, it challenges the established chronology of Anglo-American history; America gained a significant foothold in British popular culture long before the twentieth century. Moreover, this was not a result of a forcible American ‘invasion’ but a form of voluntary transatlantic exchange driven by the tastes and desires of British newspaper readers. Secondly, it argues that America’s presence in late-Victorian popular culture has been underestimated by historians who have focused instead on domestically produced culture, engagements with Western Europe, and the cultural dimensions of Empire. Whilst the full extent of America’s significance cannot be mapped out in one study, this thesis establishes the extent of America’s cultural presence and makes the case for its insertion into future Victorian Studies scholarship. Thirdly, this thesis contributes to the growing field of press history. It maps out connections between British and American newspapers, exploring how the press served to move information between the old world and the new. Finally, this project acts as an early example of born-digital scholarship; a study conceived in response to the development of digital archives. As such, it contributes to discussions on digital methodologies and debates within the field of Digital Humanities. In particular, it demonstrates that digitisation allows researchers to research and write do new kinds of history; to ask new questions, make new connections, and develop new projects – to do things that we couldn’t do before.
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On Saturday 15 April 1865, Americans awoke to find their country in crisis. The previous evening, Abraham Lincoln had been assassinated in a Washington theatre.\(^1\) Within hours of the President’s death, details of the “dark and bloody tragedy” had begun “trembling over the wires” of the country’s telegraph network.\(^2\) By 10am the following morning, flags in San Francisco were flying at half-mast. By midday, newspapers in the East and mid-West had begun to publish detailed eyewitness accounts of the assassination. The story continued to loom large in the American press throughout the following week; the hunt for John Wilkes Booth, the inauguration of Andrew Johnson, and a range of public and political responses to the “national calamity” all commanded extensive coverage.\(^3\) On the other side of the Atlantic, however, news of the assassination was nowhere to be seen. Entirely unaware of events in Washington, the foreign intelligence columns of the London press dissected the closing chapters of the American Civil War – events which had taken place more than a fortnight earlier. The Glasgow Herald even published an unfortunate ‘Address to President Lincoln’ in which a local anti-slavery association wished him health and success during the next phase of his presidency.\(^4\) A week later, the situation remained unchanged. As grief-stricken crowds poured into Washington to witness the departure of Lincoln’s funeral train, London’s Morning Post summarised the proceedings of an Irish cattle show, the Leeds Mercury weighed the threat of a Russian plague epidemic, and the Daily News reported on

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\(^2\) Daily Evening Bulletin (San Francisco), 15 April 1865: 2.

\(^3\) For examples, see: The Daily Cleveland Herald, 17 April 1865: 1; Daily National Intelligencer, 17 April 1865: 1; North American and United States Gazette, 17 April 1865: 1; Boston Daily Advertiser, 17 April 1865: 2; Daily Evening Bulletin, 19 April 1865: 2.

\(^4\) Glasgow Herald, 15 April 1865: 6.
the Home Secretary’s visit to Newcastle.\textsuperscript{5} It was not until the 27\textsuperscript{th} of April that a Canadian mail steamer finally delivered news of the assassination to Britain. By the time Victorian readers had the opportunity to engage with the story, the President had been dead for almost two weeks.

Lincoln’s assassination forms an appropriate opening to this study, for it marks the end of a tumultuous era in American history and the beginning of a transformative period in transatlantic media relations. Sixteen years later, when President Garfield was shot by a deranged office-seeker, the relationship between America and the British press had changed beyond recognition.\textsuperscript{6} This time, news of the attempted assassination reached Britain within hours.\textsuperscript{7} As Garfield’s life hung in the balance, hourly updates on his pulse, temperature, and respiration were telegraphed to British newspaper offices via the new Atlantic Cable.\textsuperscript{8} These updates were printed alongside the latest accounts of the shooting, descriptions of the assassin, reactions from the American press, responses of world markets, and messages of sympathy from international leaders.\textsuperscript{9} A President’s death, whilst generating a predictable surge of interest, was only part of a wider journalistic phenomenon. Each morning, the latest news stories from ‘across the pond’ appeared in newspapers throughout the country. Accounts of a political speech in Washington, a devastating fire in Nevada, a gruesome murder in Chicago, a gunfight in Indiana, and the closing prices at the New York stock exchange were printed by British provincial and metropolitan newspapers hours after being published in America.

In addition to this high-speed news traffic, qualitative changes in the composition of British newspapers allowed new representations of America to circulate within Victorian popular culture. During the 1880s, an increasing number of British newspapers began to populate their

\textsuperscript{5} Morning Post, 21 April 1865: 2; Leeds Mercury, 21 April 1865: 2; Daily News, 21 April 1865: 2. On Lincoln’s funeral train, see: Scott D. Trostel, The Lincoln Funeral Train: the final journey and national funeral for Abraham Lincoln, (Ohio, 2002).


\textsuperscript{7} Lloyd’s Weekly Newspaper, 3 July 1881: 7.

\textsuperscript{8} The Times, 9 July 1881: 12.

\textsuperscript{9} The North-Eastern Daily Gazette, 4 July 1881: 4; Daily News, 4 July 1881: 6; Glasgow Herald, 4 July 1881: 7; The Pall Mall Gazette, 4 July 1881: 2-3; The Morning Post, 4 July 1881:7.
pages with an entertaining miscellany of gossip columns, jokes, fashion advice, children’s corners, serialised fiction, travelogues, literary extracts, scientific factoids, and sports reports. The proliferation of these texts offered a range of important new contexts in which British readers were invited to encounter America. A British traveller’s first impressions of Chicago; a short story about life in a western mining town; a list of exotic American cocktails; a report of a boxing match in New York; a joke featuring an exchange between two hot-headed Texans; an extract from Mark Twain; descriptions of the dresses worn by New York ladies; the exploits of a Philadelphian cat burglar; an interview with Thomas Edison – these, and thousands more, provided new representations of everyday American life and culture that went beyond the dry, perfunctory bulletins of commercial and political intelligence that had dominated transatlantic press coverage only a decade earlier. Many of these new items were clipped directly from the pages of the American press and then recirculated by British editors. This pervasive ‘culture of reprinting’ propelled fragments of imported American print culture around the country. In the process, these texts acted as vessels for the circulation of other elements of American culture such as the country’s distinctive slang and dialects. This process of ‘Americanization’ continued throughout the 1880s and 1890s. By 1901, when William McKinley became the third American president to be shot dead whilst in office, the United States enjoyed a pervasive presence in the everyday reading experiences of the Victorian public.

This thesis explores the role played by the press in mediating the Victorian relationship with America. It explores how a series of changes in the composition and readership of Victorian newspapers allowed the press to function as a new kind of ‘contact zone’ between Britain and the United States; one which facilitated a range of new transatlantic encounters, exchanges, debates, and confrontations. The core arguments of the thesis are structured around three key areas: (1) exploring the significance of the press as a transatlantic ‘contact zone’; (2) reassessing the Victorian relationship with America; (3) and demonstrating the potential of qualitative and quantitative digital research methodologies.
The relationship between the British and American press is currently the subject of growing academic interest.¹⁰ Media historians have recognised that journalism did not develop independently on both sides of the Atlantic but was, in the words of Jean Chalaby, an “Anglo-American invention”.¹¹ Martin Conboy’s history of The Press and Popular Culture, for example, contrasts and compares the emergence of popular journalism in both Britain and the United States and demonstrates how stylistic, typographical, and rhetorical innovations pioneered in one country often found their way into the journalism of the other.¹² This process of transatlantic journalistic exchange has recently been mapped out in impressive detail by the press historian Joel H. Wiener. His latest monograph, The Americanization of the British Press, 1830s-1914, follows the example of Conboy and Chalaby and argues that the development of the popular press was a collaborative transatlantic project.¹³ As the title indicates, Wiener suggests that America was the leading player in this process; “while popular journalism in Britain pioneered the retailing of gossip and the use of pictures,” he argues, “most of the key transformations in journalism occurred a little earlier and had a greater impact in America.”¹⁴ Interviews, human interest stories, sensational cross-heads, a culture of speed, and the adoption of what Conboy terms a “commercial vernacular” are all highlighted by Wiener as American innovations that were subsequently employed by British editors such as W. T. Stead, George Newnes, T. P. O’Connor,

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¹⁰ See, for example: Joel Wiener and Mark Hampton (eds.), Anglo-American Media Interactions, 1850-1900, (Basingstoke, 2007); Ann L. Ardis and Patrick Collier (eds.), Transatlantic Print Culture, 1880-1940: Emerging Media, Emerging Modernisms, (Basingstoke, 2008).
and Alfred Harmsworth. Wiener argues that these developments occurred in response to shared social, cultural, and political changes, including the evolution of representative forms of government, the development of new communications networks, and increasing literacy rates. The result was the emergence of a shared transatlantic print culture in which popular newspapers on both sides of the Atlantic courted the attention of an emerging mass readership by drawing upon a shared repertoire of new journalistic techniques.

Wiener’s study makes a vital contribution to our understanding of Anglo-America media relations. However, the wider implications of his thesis still need to be teased out. In particular, he does not explore how the emergence of a shared transatlantic print culture shaped wider social, cultural, political, and economic interactions between nineteenth-century Britain and America. How, we are left wondering, did the ‘Americanisation’ of Victorian newspapers affect their readers’ relationship with the United States? Building upon the groundwork provided by Wiener, this thesis argues that the emergence of a popular press in Britain and America resulted in the formation of a powerful transatlantic ‘contact zone’; a cultural space which facilitated a range of new Anglo-American encounters, exchanges and debates. The term ‘contact zone’ is borrowed from Mary Louise Pratt, who defines it as a “space where disparate [and geographically distant] cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other.” This might refer to a physical space, such as a border town or a classroom, but can also be used to describe cultural spaces such as the press or the literary marketplace.

The function of a contact zone is determined by both its form and its participants. Pratt’s own research focuses on relations between Europe and its colonies and, as a result, her definition

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15 Martin Conboy, *The Language of Newspapers: Socio-Historical Perspectives*, (London, 2010), ch. 5. It should be noted that Wiener himself emphasises terms such as ‘democratic’ and ‘popular’ in place of ‘commercial’ when describing the relationship between popular newspapers and their readers. See, Joel H. Wiener, *The Americanization of the British Press*: 5.

of the contact zone emphasises moments of conflict, domination and subordination. The relationship between late-Victorian Britain and America was not as asymmetrical as those that existed between colonizers and the colonized; by the late-Victorian period the United States had successfully shaken off its colonial identity and was beginning to challenge the economic, political, and cultural supremacy of Britain. Nevertheless, this transitional period in Anglo-American relations brought its own moments of conflict and resistance as readers, journalists and cultural commentators on both sides of the Atlantic responded to changes in the transatlantic balance of power. As Chapter Two of this thesis argues, the popular press provided Victorian readers with daily reminders of the United States’ growing influence and formed a space in which conceptions of British identity could be reinforced or reformulated in response to the prospect of a coming ‘American future’.

It is important to stress, however, that contact zones are not exclusively based around conflict – they are also spaces of exploration and exchange. The Americanization of the British press was not limited to stylistic changes. During the final quarter of the nineteenth century, the United States also began to occupy an increasingly pervasive presence in the content of Victorian newspapers. The latest news from ‘across the pond’ appeared on a daily basis in the form of telegraphic bulletins, reports from American correspondents, columns of collected ‘American Intelligence’, and extracts from the American press. Whilst news from America had long been a feature of British papers, by the 1880s it travelled at a higher speed, arrived in greater quantities, and covered a broader range of topics. Whilst it would be misleading to suggest that American news dominated the pages of Victorian newspapers, it nevertheless occupied a substantial

\[ See: Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, (London, 1992). Pratt developed her theory of the contact zone in order to offer an alternative to the positive connotations of the term ‘community’.

presence in the daily reading materials of the British public. Crucially, as Chapter One argues, the democratic and market-driven ethos of popular journalism suggests that coverage of American affairs was not forced on Victorian readers, as the concept of ‘Americanization’ often seems to suggest, but was printed in response to widespread public demand. Whilst some readers may have sought out this information in order to denigrate the United States or keep a watchful eye on the activities of a threatening rival, this thesis argues that others were driven by a desire (born either through curiosity or personal necessity) to interact with the social, cultural, economic, and political life of America on more positive terms.

America’s presence in the late-Victorian press was not limited to news coverage. As Chapter Three explores, British editors also printed clippings of American popular culture. Extracts from the work of American authors such as Mark Twain and Artemus Ward, interesting tit-bits sourced from New York magazines, and columns of the country’s distinctive jokes all appeared regularly. These imported texts provided British readers with new ways to access, explore, and interpret the landscapes, languages, characters, and culture of the United States. Once again, the fact that these clippings were printed in response to popular demand highlights the positive dimensions of the press as a forum for Anglo-American cultural exchange. Finally, as Chapter Four demonstrates, the press acted as a stepping stone between British and American culture. Each day, clippings of American print culture appeared side-by-side with the work of British writers and, over time, boundaries began to blur. The distinctive rhythm employed by American newspaper humourists crept into the work of Victorian joke writers; British journalists began to mimic the racy style of their American counterparts; and fragments of American English started to appear everywhere from adverts, to editorials, to readers’ correspondence. Once these American modes of expression had gained a foothold in the press, many, such as the slang term ‘skedaddle’, made the leap into wider British discourse.
This is not to suggest that the press was the only point of contact between nineteenth-century Britain and America. Improvements in the speed, safety, affordability and comfort of transatlantic steamship travel significantly increased the number of Victorians who were able to visit America first hand.\textsuperscript{19} Between 1871 and 1900 the gross migration from England, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland to the United States was just under four million.\textsuperscript{20} These passengers were joined by thousands of British tourists, businessmen, writers and traveling performers who made temporary tours of the United States before returning home. Such trips however were beyond the means of most Victorians. The \textit{Pall Mall Gazette} advised its readers that “two things are essential to the complete success of a tour in America – time and money.”\textsuperscript{21} It suggested that “to ‘do’ the country properly one ought to be prepared to spend several months there – six months if possible.”\textsuperscript{22} And, when the paper asked a European tour agent how much such a trip might cost, he calculated that “two hundred or two hundred and fifty pounds would cover the thing pretty comfortably.”\textsuperscript{23} Some cheaper methods for visiting the country were available to less affluent travellers. In 1891 the co-operative association promoted a one-month tour of America to coincide with the Chicago World’s Fair of 1893. Taking in New York, Philadelphia, Washington, Chicago and Niagara Falls, it was hoped that the expenses for the entire excursion “would not exceed 25 guineas.”\textsuperscript{24} Nevertheless, it was still considered essential to announce the trip two years in advance so that prospective travellers could defer their yearly holiday allowance and put sufficient money aside to meet the costs. As the promotion itself recognised, the venture was

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\textsuperscript{21} \textit{The Pall Mall Gazette}, 4 July 1889: 3.
\textsuperscript{22} \textit{The Pall Mall Gazette}, 4 July 1889: 3.
\textsuperscript{23} \textit{The Pall Mall Gazette}, 3 September 1889: 2.
\textsuperscript{24} \textit{The Leeds Mercury}, 5 November 1891: 5.
\end{flushleft}
specially “intended for working men and others whose means did not permit of visiting the New World under ordinary circumstances.”

Whilst the vast majority of Victorians never crossed the Atlantic in person, many were able to experience the country vicariously. Migrants communicated details of their new life to friends and relatives in Britain and a surprising number – usually estimated as a quarter – returned home to tell their stories in person. Similarly, a remarkable number of British travellers felt compelled to publish their impressions of America in travelogues. Indeed, by the end of the period, it was customary for book reviewers to joke that nothing could possibly be said by a new work of transatlantic travel literature that had not been covered many times before. The willingness of publishers to print so many of these accounts suggests that they enjoyed a degree of commercial success. However, it is unlikely that many Victorian readers sought out more than two or three of these texts in their lifetime; even the most enthusiastic observers of American life and culture would have found little to capture their imagination in another awe-struck description of Niagara Falls or systematic comparison of the meals served in London and New York hotels. The price of these texts may also have limited their circulation. “In spite of numerous volumes which from time to time are published upon [America]”, W. T. Stead argued in 1871, “the majority of these works are too high priced for the middle and working -classes to purchase them.” Whilst it would be misleading to suggest that books about America were entirely inaccessible to a mass readership – despite Stead’s assertion, some travelogues were published at affordable prices and others were available at lending libraries and Mechanics’ Institutes – it is clear that they were not embedded into the Victorian public’s everyday reading experiences to the same extent as the

popular press. As Stead recognised, the vast majority of Victorian readers derived their “chief knowledge of American affairs... from the newspaper.”

British citizens were not the only travellers to cross the Atlantic. Every steamship that sailed to the New World returned a fortnight later with a corresponding cargo of American migrants, travellers, performers, texts, and commodities. Historians have explored America’s presence in Victorian Britain from a range of perspectives. Some have examined the experiences of American immigrants, with a particular focus on canonical writers such as Henry James and the glamorous ‘Dollar Princesses’ who married into the British aristocracy. Others have explored the experiences and responses of American travellers. Whilst these studies provide valuable insights into transatlantic relations, it is important to stress that the number of Americans in late-Victorian Britain was actually quite small. Census figures reveal that 19,740 U.S. citizens were present in England and Wales on 5 April 1891 – approximately 0.07% of the total population, and

29 Northern Echo, 18 January 1871: 4.
substantially less than the 1,008,220 immigrants of English and Welsh birth enumerated in the US census of the same year.\textsuperscript{32} A quarter of these immigrants were concentrated in London – most of them in affluent, West End areas such as Kensington, Marylebone and Hanover Square.\textsuperscript{33} These numbers would have risen further during the “invasion season” of July and August when an influx of American tourists descended on the capital.\textsuperscript{34} During this period, those who lived or worked in the centre of the city – particularly in shops, restaurants, hotels, tourist attractions, and as cabbies – may have come into contact with Americans on a daily basis. Similarly, as David Seed has demonstrated, residents of major port cities such as Liverpool would also have encountered a steady stream of transatlantic travellers as they entered and left the country.\textsuperscript{35} However, for the majority of Victorians whose everyday lives did not intersect with the transatlantic tourist trail, such meetings would have been far less common. Residents of York, for example, shared their city with just 27 U.S citizens in 1891; the American populations of Grimsby (24), Wolverhampton (23), and Norwich (19) were lower still. Encounters with American immigrants and travellers would have been even more unusual in rural areas.\textsuperscript{36} The North Yorkshire market town of Guisborough, for instance, had only a pair of American babies amongst its 5,565 inhabitants – both of them born to British parents during what appears to have been a short visit to the United States.

Whilst the number of American citizens visiting late-Victorian Britain was relatively small, some of these travellers commanded significant attention. Humourists such as Mark Twain and

\textsuperscript{32} Census of England and Wales. 1891. Volume IV. General Report, with summary tables and appendices: 65 [House of Commons Parliamentary Papers Online]. This was an 11% increase on the figures for 1881, which listed 17,767 U.S citizens as living in Britain. In 1891 Americans accounted for just 5.37% of all the foreign born people in Britain.
\textsuperscript{33} 4909 U.S citizens are recorded as living in London. Particularly high numbers are recorded in Kensington (418), St. George & Hanover Square (520), Marylebone (430). Compare these figures with East End areas that were popular with other immigrant groups: Mile End & Old Town (82), Whitechapel (142), St. George in the East (41). Census of England and Wales. 1891. Ages, condition as to marriage, occupations, birth-places, and infirmities. Vol. II: 19-21, [House of Commons Parliamentary Papers Online].
\textsuperscript{35} David Seed, American Travellers in Liverpool.
\textsuperscript{36} Census of England and Wales. 1891. Ages, condition as to marriage, occupations, birth-places, and infirmities. Vol. III
Artemus Ward delivered lectures to packed theatres, whilst a range of lesser known actors, musicians and humourists appeared in the country’s theatres and music halls. The most successful of these performers was William F Cody – a cowboy turned showman, better known as Buffalo Bill. When his spectacular Wild West Show set up camp in London in 1887, it was attended by more than one million people, including Queen Victoria and several other European monarchs. Performances were also given in Birmingham and Manchester, whilst subsequent tours in 1891, 1892, 1902, and 1904 brought the show to major provincial centres. The success of these performances established Buffalo Bill alongside Mark Twain and Thomas Edison as one of the most recognisable American celebrities and played a crucial role in establishing the mythology of the Wild West in the European imagination. However, whilst touring performers played an important role in shaping British conceptions of the United States, it is important to recognise that these blockbuster events were not part of the fabric of everyday life. Despite their remarkable popularity, the majority of Victorians never attended one of Twain’s lectures or witnessed Buffalo Bill’s legendary marksmanship – few of those who did would have been fortunate enough to see these performances twice.

Newspapers, on the other hand, occupied a pervasive presence in everyday Victorian culture. By the end of the nineteenth century, even the most isolated pockets of rural society had access to a wide variety of local and metropolitan publications. In 1891, for example, the

Reverend J. C. Atkinson described the increasing circulation of newspapers in the small moorland parish of Danby. “Forty-five years ago”, he reflected,

there were, I believe, about three newspapers brought into the Dale... I myself remember the Yorkshire Gazette passing on from one farmer to another, and its circulation hardly ceasing until it was three or four weeks old. But all that is strangely altered now. Newspapers abound, and comprising those statedly taken and others of more casual introduction, all classes of opinion... are to be met with.\(^{40}\)

A keyword search of the Yorkshire Gazette for that year returns at least 783 references to America.\(^{41}\) Whilst Atkinson does not disclose the identity of other newspapers circulating in his parish, likely candidates included The North-Eastern Daily Gazette of Middlesbrough (2319 references to America), Darlington’s Northern Echo (1157), and major metropolitan papers like Lloyd’s Weekly News (648).\(^{42}\)

Atkinson’s memoirs give no precise indication of how many people in Danby consumed newspapers. However, Lady Bell’s survey of reading habits in nearby Middlesbrough revealed that approximately three quarters of men, and only slightly fewer women regularly read newspapers.\(^{43}\) Whilst it is dangerous to extrapolate evidence from a single provincial working-class community, if the same pattern prevailed throughout the country then conservative estimates suggest that at least 15 million adults in England and Wales would have consumed newspapers, magazines, or periodicals on a weekly basis.\(^{44}\) Given that Middlesbrough was a predominantly working-class town, the extrapolated overall figures for the country are likely to have been significantly higher.


\(^{41}\) Full text search: “America” OR “American” OR “Americans” OR “United States” OR “Yankee” OR “Chicago” OR “New York” OR “Philadelphia” OR “California” OR “San Francisco” OR “Texas” OR “Texan”. In: Yorkshire Post. Date range: 1 Jan 1891 – 31 Dec 1891. Database: \textit{The British Newspaper Archive}.


\(^{43}\) Lady Florence Bell, \textit{At the Works: A Study of a Manufacturing Town}, (1907): 144. Bell’s survey of reading habits was conducted in the 1890s.

\(^{44}\) In 1891 the population of England and Wales was 29 million. Approximately 10 million of these people were discounted for being under the age of thirteen (though many children in this age bracket were voracious readers) or above the age of 65. A quarter of the remaining people were then removed to fit Bell’s figure.
If we borrow the anthropologist Robin Dunbar’s theory that humans are able to maintain stable social relationships with approximately 150 people, and then multiply this figure by the number of U.S. citizens in Britain in 1891, we are left with an estimate of 2.9 million Victorians who knew somebody from America. This estimate does not account for overlapping friendship networks, the tendency of migrant groups to form their own communities, or the transience of American tourists, so this figure is probably too high. Even if we accept it at face value, it is substantially lower than the number of Victorians who encountered America through the press. In a similar vein, Chatto & Windus are estimated to have sold 1,150,000 copies of Mark Twain’s works to the British public during his lifetime. By the mid-1890s, Lloyd’s Weekly News alone sold in excess of one million copies per week. As a result, a column of recycled American newspaper jokes published in the paper in 1896 reached a larger transatlantic audience in a single week than Tom Sawyer, Huckleberry Finn, Innocents Abroad, and other masterpieces of American literary humour did in 25 years.

This is a crudely quantitative way to measure cultural significance – it is likely, after all, that the quality of Twain’s characterisation and the sheer spectacle of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show made a more lasting impression on the Victorian imagination than many of the jokes published in Lloyd’s Weekly News. However, the raw numbers are simply too powerful to ignore. The press had the ability to reach more Victorians than any other form of British or American culture – it was the only Anglo-American contact zone to operate on a genuinely national scale, and to do so on a daily or weekly basis. By the 1880s and 1890s, the most successful publications conceived of their audiences in the largest possible terms: middle class and working class, metropolitan and provincial, men and women, young and old. It would be misleading to suggest

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45 For an lively introduction to Dunbar’s theory, see Robin Dunbar, How Many Friends Does One Person Need?: Dunbar’s Number and Other Evolutionary Quirks, (London, 2010), ch. 3.
that all Victorians engaged in identical reading experiences – subscribers to *The Times* and fans of *Tit-Bits* consumed very different cultural texts – but, as this thesis demonstrates, almost every newspaper in the country allowed its readers to engage with the United States. They did so in a variety of different ways. Some newspapers emphasized political and economic news from across the Atlantic, whilst others offered entertaining snippets of American print culture; some were openly hostile in their dealings with America, whilst others celebrated the country’s ‘go ahead’ attitude, inventiveness, and democratic ethos. Few, however, chose to ignore it.

In summary, the power of the press as a transatlantic contact zone depended on five key properties. Firstly, its textual and cultural *compatibility* with American journalism, coupled with the development of high-speed transatlantic communications networks, allowed information to flow freely from one country to another. Secondly, it allowed America to be represented across a broad range of textual genres and from a continuous stream of new perspectives – no other text or cultural event could provide the closing prices of the New York stock exchange, political bulletins from Washington, a news story about hoodlums in San Francisco, a joke about Chicago lawyers, an advert for American fountain pens, an anecdote from an American literary humourist, a short story about life in Texas, a summary of New York fashion trends, a report of a Boston boxing match, and a philological investigation of American slang all in the same place. Thirdly, as we have seen, the sheer *scale* of its circulation allowed millions of Victorians from around the country to interact with America – a significantly larger audience than any other form of transatlantic encounter. Fourthly, unlike American literature, travelogues, or one-off theatrical performances, the *periodicity* of the press allowed its readers to interact with America on a daily or weekly basis. This continuous process of transatlantic exchange established the place of the United States in everyday British culture – a position which has since been cemented by other forms of transatlantic mass culture such as cinema, television, recorded music, video games, and, most recently, the internet. Finally, the press acted as a space in which British *responses* to the
United States could be formed, modified, articulated, circulated, and debated. As the next section outlines, this prompts us to reassess our ideas about Victorian attitudes to America.

**Victorian Responses to America**

Historians seeking to explore Victorian attitudes towards America have not been limited by a lack of viable source material. Ada Nisbet’s monumental bibliography tracking the chronological development of ‘British Comment on the United States’ covers the period between 1832 and 1899 and identifies 3,211 major entries, with something approaching 20,000 further publications listed in her detailed annotations. Nisbet and her research assistants gathered these sources from a wide range of genres – pamphlets, leaflets, essays, travel writing, histories, economic and political studies, emigrant handbooks and guidebooks, legal texts, anthropological studies and scientific texts. In order to make the project manageable she was obliged to exclude most British works of fiction about America, a vast literary landscape in itself, and to draw sparingly upon commentary from newspapers and periodicals. Even with these concessions, the bibliography took several decades to complete and only appeared in print seven years after Nisbet’s death. In 1969, she explained that her desire to pursue such an ambitious project stemmed from a fundamental disappointment in the way that academic scholarship has explored Victorian commentary on America. Too much of this research, she argued, relied on “the same old group of shop-worn [European] travellers whose favourite passages had long since become clichés.” This privileged group of texts included Dickens’ *American Notes* (1842), Alexis de Toqueville’s *Democracy in America* (1835, 1840), Frances Trollope’s *Domestic Manners of the Americans* (1832), Anthony Trollope’s *North America* (1862), Matthew Arnold’s *Civilization in the United States* (1888), and James Bryce’s *American Commonwealth* (1888). Whilst the views of these well-

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known figures are certainly worth studying, they are an imperfect tool with which to analyse wider Victorian public opinion. Whilst other intellectual commentators doubtlessly shared Matthew Arnold’s misgivings about the democratic ethos of American mass culture, it is unlikely that the hypothetical man on the Clapham omnibus would have responded to the country in exactly the same way. Similarly, despite the popular appeal of his work, it is difficult to establish whether Dickens’ much-quoted opinions on American society were representative of his many readers. Whilst recent explorations of Anglo-American travel literature have drawn upon a broader range of commentary, the representativeness of these sources remains a problem.\(^{50}\) Simply by visiting America, British travel writers entered into an atypical relationship with the country and, as we have seen, the vast majority of Victorians formed their opinions of America without crossing the Atlantic. In order to understand the Victorian relationship with America, it is necessary therefore to move beyond the familiar commentaries of canonical authors, politicians, cultural elites, and transatlantic travellers and go in search of a more popular response.

One way to access these popular responses is to pursue what Jonathan Rose, in his landmark study of the *Intellectual Life of the British Working Class*, has termed a “history of audiences”:

> Put simply, a history of audiences reverses the traditional perspective of intellectual history, focusing on readers and students rather than authors and teachers. It first defines a mass audience, then determines its cultural diet, and describes the responses of that audience not only to literature, but also to education, religion, art, and any other cultural activity... Broadly, an audience history asks how people read their culture.\(^{51}\)

The evidence for his study is drawn from an impressively broad reading of working-class personal testimony. These sources are then used, for example, to explore the ways in which working-class people responded to, and made meaning from the act of reading Marx’s *Capital*. Rose’s approach


offers tantalising insights into working-class responses to print culture, and has demonstrated that it is possible to access the everyday reading experiences of working-class Victorians.

However, applying Rose’s methodology to this study is problematic. Firstly, sources of viable personal testimony are extremely limited; whilst some working-class travellers chronicled their experiences of the new world, few diarists recorded their impressions of textual encounters with America. Fewer still documented their responses to American newspaper coverage. As Simon Eliot argues:

The most common reading experience, by the mid-nineteenth century at latest, would most likely be the advertising poster, all the tickets, handbills and forms generated by an industrial society, and the daily or weekly paper. Most of this reading was, of course, never recorded or commented upon for it was too much a part of the fabric of everyday life to be noticed.52

Even if such commentary was available, we would be confronted with the problem of assessing its representativeness. Rose’s own reliance on personal testimony leads him to focus on an autodidact culture that was hardly typical of wider working-class experiences. A disproportionate number of working-class autobiographies were written by skilled, male workers with left-wing political values. Rose himself acknowledges that memoirists are “not entirely representative of their class... if only because they are unusually articulate.” However, it is important to recognise that this literary ability was probably a result of other characteristics, experiences, values, and priorities which memoirists might not have shared with other members of their class, not least in terms of their political and social activism. As Eliot argues, “any reading recorded in a historically recoverable way is, almost by definition, an exceptional recording of an uncharacteristic event by an untypical person.”53

An alternative approach to the history of audiences is therefore required. This thesis argues that the most effective way to access popular responses to America is to analyse the key

52 Simon Eliot, ‘The Reading Experience Database; or, what are we to do about the history of reading?’: [http://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/RED/redback.htm](http://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/RED/redback.htm) [11 April 2010]
53 Simon Eliot, “The Reading Experience Database”. 
cultural space in which responses were formed. In other words, by examining the ways in which newspapers reported, represented, discussed, and marketed the United States we can explore the tastes and attitudes of their implied readers. The popular press is particularly valuable for this kind of analysis. In order to remain afloat in an increasingly competitive marketplace, editors of late-Victorian popular newspapers needed to be sensitive to public demand. As subsequent sections of this chapter explore, circulation figures were carefully monitored and changes made if they dropped, whilst prize competitions and readers’ submissions were systematically used to gauge the evolution of popular tastes. If audiences were not attracted by daily bulletins of American political news or weekly columns of imported American jokes then these features would have been unceremoniously jettisoned. The fact that these features appeared in the press week after week suggests strongly that a significant number of Victorian readers enjoyed consuming them. This is not to suggest that the press provides an exact mirror of public opinion; if a journalist for Lloyd’s Weekly News wrote a complementary article about America it is unlikely that all of the paper’s one million readers would have shared his sentiments. Similarly, whilst many readers of the Hampshire Telegraph evidently enjoyed the paper’s regular instalments of Yankee humour others may have skipped these columns in search of other content. Nevertheless, no other source gets us closer to Victorian public opinion; despite its imperfections, the press is the most powerful and sensitive tool at our disposal.

Existing scholarship on the Victorian relationship with America has typically divided British opinion into two opposing camps: on one side, anti-American commentators recoiled in horror at the emerging power of this new country and asserted the superiority of British culture and society; on the other, pro-American commentators championed the cause of American democracy and sought to remodel British society along Yankee lines. Matthew Arnold’s damning indictment of American popular culture, for example, is often compared to W. T. Stead’s
enthusiastic support for the egalitarian ethos and commercial focus of American journalism.\textsuperscript{54} This
binary framework presents America as an ideological battlefield in which the forces of British
nationalism, tradition and cultural conservatism were pitted against the opposing forces of
radicalism, modernity and popular culture.\textsuperscript{55} However, an analysis of the popular press reveals
that Victorian attitudes to America were rarely polarized in this neat fashion. Many commentators
expressed ambivalence about the United States, whilst others demonstrated a guarded
enthusiasm for elements of American culture whilst simultaneously distancing themselves from
others. Chapter Three, for example, uncovers a variety of responses to American newspaper
humour, ranging from derisive forms of anti-American mockery to a more enthusiastic ‘laughter
of good fellowship’. In order to better understand the Victorian relationship with America, it is
necessary to appreciate these nuances, contradictions, and differences of degree.

The Digital Turn

History is changing. Advances in digital technology have transformed the recent past into a
foreign country – historians did things differently in 2002. A decade ago, most of us used desktop
computers to perform relatively mundane tasks such as sending e-mails, word-processing, and
browsing library catalogues. Google and Wikipedia were beginning to revolutionise the world’s
relationship with information, but the prevailing mood within the academy was still suspicious of
digital research. In recent years, however, online databases and search tools have become
increasingly central to our research practices. In particular, the digitisation of archival materials
has transformed the internet into a powerful bridge to the past. Victorianists have been
particularly well served by these developments. Millions of pages of nineteenth-century books,
pamphlets, government records, illustrations, advertisements and other forms of printed

\textsuperscript{55} For a summary of this debate, see: James Epstein, “‘America’ in the Victorian Cultural Imagination”, in
Fred M. Leventhal and Roland Quinault (eds.), \textit{Anglo-American Attitudes: From Revolution to Partnership},
(Aldershot, 2000): 107-123. These key themes are unpacked in subsequent sections of the thesis; tensions
between popular and elite culture can be found in Chapter One, whilst tradition and modernity feature in
Chapter Two.
ephemera are now accessible via online archives. Arguably the most ambitious of these projects have centred on the digitisation of the nineteenth-century press. Thousands of newspapers, magazines and periodicals are now available in online archives – so many, in fact, that it is becoming increasingly difficult to keep track of them. Lengthy runs of newspapers such as The Times, The Economist, The Financial Times, The Illustrated London News, and The Scotsman are available through individual archives. Hundreds of similar publications are held within multi-title databases such as 19th Century British Library Newspapers, 19th Century UK Periodicals, Nineteenth Century Serials Edition, Periodicals Archive Online, and ProQuest Historical Newspapers. While The Times Digital Archive was launched as long ago as 2002, the majority of these databases were developed in the last five years. Moreover, the pace of digitisation shows no sign of slowing. The British Newspaper Archive was launched in November 2011 with 170 titles and is currently expanding by 8,000 pages per day.

This project is among the first studies of nineteenth-century cultural history to be specifically designed around the methodological potential of digital newspaper archives. As such, it seeks to contribute to emerging debates on digital methodologies. In recent years there has been a growing recognition among Victorianists and press historians that the creative use of digital newspaper archives allows us to explore the past in powerful new ways. In 2008, for example, the Journal of Victorian Culture published a roundtable discussion in which several contributors stressed the need to break free of established research practices and develop new

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57 See bibliography for a detailed breakdown of the archives used in this thesis.

58 <www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk>
ways of approaching digital archives. In 2010, a major conference on digital newspaper research was held at the British Library. In the same year, the University of Sheffield launched its ‘Centre for the Study of Journalism and History’, announcing that it was “particularly interested in developing robust methodologies for exploiting digital archives of journalism content.” Most recently, an AHRC sponsored research network entitled ‘Exploring the language of the popular in Anglo-American Newspapers, 1833-1988’ has placed digital methodologies at the heart of its agenda.

However, it could be argued that the most productive conversations about digital methodologies are currently taking place between a growing number of historians and literary critics (particularly those in the early stages of their career) who are currently exploring the interdisciplinary field of what has been called the ‘Digital Humanities’. A comprehensive survey of this movement lies beyond the scope of this study – partly because it is too dynamic and unstable to be captured by the comparatively slow and static medium of print. However, one of the most exciting areas of research currently focuses on the use of computational tools to analyse large-scale databases of books and newspapers. Dan Cohen and Fred Gibbs, for example, are currently using ‘text-mining’ techniques to examine the titles of 1.6 million books published in Britain during the long nineteenth century. By plotting and graphing the frequency of words such as ‘progress’, ‘science’, ‘faith’, and ‘modern’ they have been able to visualise some of the key ideas

60 Digitised History: newspapers and their impact on research into 18th and 19th century Britain, British Library, 20 July 2010.
61 <www.shef.ac.uk/journalismhistory>
62 <www.shef.ac.uk/journalism/research/exploring-lang> The network was launched with a one-day conference entitled Exploring Digital Newspaper Archives, University of Sheffield, 14 January 2011. Papers from the conference are scheduled to appear in a forthcoming edition of Media History.
and forces that shaped Victorian culture.\textsuperscript{64} A team of Harvard scientists have recently given this particular brand of the Digital Humanities the name of ‘culturomics’.\textsuperscript{65} In their study, they text-mined a corpus of 5 million digitised books and attempted to quantify the evolution of English grammar, the changing speeds with which society forgets its past, the adoption of new technologies, the effects of censorship, and the changing nature of fame. Similar techniques have been applied to newspaper archives by the digital humanist, Kalev Leetaru, who has used a database of 100 million articles to track changes in the ‘tone’ of global news coverage and to retrospectively ‘predict’ both the Arab Spring and the hiding place of Osama Bin Laden.\textsuperscript{66}

Despite the eye-catching headlines generated by these projects, methodologies developed within the field of Digital Humanities have yet to make a significant contribution to mainstream historiographical debates.\textsuperscript{67} Critics of the movement have argued that it has yet to open up new fields of enquiry beyond the reach of conventional methodologies.\textsuperscript{68} This is a legitimate concern. The academic value of digital archives will ultimately be measured by the quality of innovative research they produce. If historians continue to ask the same questions as they did a decade ago, but use online archives to answer them in a faster and more convenient fashion, then digitisation will have delivered a practical, but hardly an intellectual, revolution. This thesis seeks to address these criticisms by putting a range of qualitative and quantitative methodologies to the test. In particular, it highlights two ways in which the creative use of keyword searches allows us to address the problem presented by the “vast terra incognita” of

\textsuperscript{64} Cohen revealed the first results of the project in a keynote paper given at the Victorians Institute Conference, University of Virginia, 1-3 October, 2010. A transcript of the paper is available on his blog: <http://www.dancohen.org/2010/10/04/searching-for-the-victorians> [accessed 20 December 2011]
\textsuperscript{66} Kalev H. Leetaru, ‘Culturomics 2.0: forecasting large-scale human behaviour using global news media tone in time and space’, First Monday, 16: 9, (2011).
\textsuperscript{67} Digital methodologies have made greater inroads into the field of literary studies. See, for example: Franco Moretti, Graphs, Maps, Trees: abstract models for a literary theory, (London, 2005); Ray Siemens and Susan Schreibman (eds.) A Companion to Digital Literary Studies; Amy E. Earhart and Andrew Jewell (eds.), The American Literary Scholar in the Digital Age, (Michigan, 2010); and the Beyond Search Project <beyondsearch.stanford.edu>.
\textsuperscript{68} For a discussion of this topic see: Tom Scheinfeldt, “Where’s the Beef? Does Digital Humanities Have to Answer Questions?”, Found History, 12 May 2010, <www.foundhistory.org>;}
surviving nineteenth-century print culture. Firstly, it demonstrates how keyword searches can be used across multiple archives in order to track the transnational and intertextual movement of words, texts, and ideas. In Chapter Three, for example, a brief joke about an American undertaker is tracked as it moved from its origins in a New York comic weekly, to the frontier papers of the Wild West, to the newspapers and magazines of London, and eventually to a speech made at a political meeting in north Wales. A similar approach is used in Chapter Four to track the importation and diffusion of the American word ‘skedaddle’. This ‘micro’ approach to the archive is complemented by a ‘macro’ approach which draws upon Franco Moretti’s concept of ‘distant reading’ in order to make sense of broader changes in the press. Chapters One and Two draw upon a rudimentary form of culturomics to quantify the changing presence of America in British newspapers and the emergence of the ‘American future’ in the Victorian imagination. Whilst these methodologies are still in development and are not without their faults, the new insights they grant us into the workings of British culture provide a clear indication of the potential of digital research.

Digital archives have shaped the contours of this study in two additional ways. Firstly, they have exercised considerable influence on the identification and selection of primary source material. The majority of newspapers and periodicals consulted in this study have been drawn from four online archives: 19th Century British Library Newspapers, 19th Century UK Periodicals, British Periodicals, and 19th Century U.S. Newspapers. Moreover, in order to make the most effective and consistent use of digital research methodologies, it was necessary to structure key elements of the project around the contents of a single database – the 19th Century British Library Newspaper Archive. As a result, sources have been selected as much for their digital availability as their historical significance. This raises important methodological concerns. Whilst the digitisation

70 Franco Moretti, Graphs, Maps, Trees. For a discussion of Moretti and the way in which his ideas can be applied to the nineteenth-century newspaper archive, see Bob Nicholson, “Counting Culture; or, how to read Victorian Newspapers from a distance”, Journal of Victorian Culture, (2012), forthcoming.
process is progressing rapidly, the vast majority of nineteenth-century newspapers and periodicals are not yet available online. In 2005, Patrick Leary warned of the emergence of an ‘offline penumbra’; an “increasingly remote and unvisited shadowland into which even quite important texts fall if they cannot yet be explored… by any electronic means.”\(^\text{71}\) For the purposes of this thesis, the offline penumbra is home to important texts such as Tit-Bits, the *Northern Weekly Gazette*, and the London edition of the *Detroit Free Press*. All three publications have been consulted by visiting conventional archives, but they could not be interrogated with the same qualitative depth as digitised sources or subjected to the same forms of quantitative analysis. As a result, they occupy a more peripheral position in the present study than might have been the case in a non-digital project.

This is not to suggest that the digitized sources used in this study are unfit for purpose. The *19th Century British Library Newspaper Archives* contains a total of 70 newspapers – far more than could have been analysed using non-digital methodologies. These papers were selected in consultation with a panel of librarians and academic historians who attempted to ensure that “the titles selected were geographically and politically as representative as possible and also could lay claim to a wide circulation [and]… political influence”.\(^\text{72}\) The results of this process are impressive; the archive contains a broad range of metropolitan, provincial, daily, weekly, liberal, radical, and conservative publications. Whilst it would be naïve to suggest that it provides a perfect picture of the press across the whole period – the early nineteenth-century, for example, has something of a radical bias – it is as representative as any sample that could be analysed by hand.

In fact, the number of provincial papers contained within the database counterbalances the prevailing tendency among press historians to privilege metropolitan texts. Wiener, by his


own admission, gives “a disproportionate emphasis to the journalism of London and New York.”  

He gives a brief nod to the “increasing importance of the provincial press” in this period, but argues that “London, dominant in so many ways, was, clearly, a forcing ground for journalistic creativity.”  

However, as Andrew Hobbs has recently demonstrated, the provincial press was a vibrant and influential component of Victorian popular culture. “For most of the population,” he argues,

provincial newspapers were not on the fringes of nineteenth-century print culture, but at the very heart of it... [L]ocal newspapers were more significant to most readers than metropolitan papers such as The Times... Recognition of the centrality of the local press will help us to... redraw the cultural map for the second half of the nineteenth century, shifting the emphasis from London’s dominance to a more nuanced, complex picture, in which thousands of local centres processed and passed news and ideas to and fro, sometimes via the metropolis but often independently. 

Hobbs offers several explanations for why historians have chosen to prioritise the London press: a desire to explore publications that shaped the attitudes and behaviour of ‘influential’ people; the status accorded to metropolitan newspapers (often by themselves) and the associated use of ‘provincial’ as a derogatory term; and the high circulation figures of major metropolitan titles when compared to individual local papers. However, as Hobbs argues, whilst The Times may have penetrated some of the most influential drawing rooms in London, local papers exercised a similar influence in the reading rooms of Preston and other provincial towns. Similarly, whilst the Northern Weekly Gazette enjoyed a fraction of Tit-Bit’s national circulation, in the town of Middlesbrough and its surrounding area it was the weekend paper of choice. Rather than examine provincial papers in isolation, Hobbs argues that they are better understood as forming a ‘national system’, “in the same way that local parishes constituted a national Church of England”. This study builds upon Hobbs’ foundations. It argues that provincial and metropolitan newspapers

76 Andrew Hobbs, “Reading the local paper”: 9.
combined to form a national print network; a far-reaching distribution platform that allowed imported fragments of Americana to circulate throughout the country.

Finally, digital archives have also influenced the temporal boundaries of this study. Concerns over copyright law have led libraries and digitisation companies to focus their efforts on the nineteenth century. Whilst some twentieth-century newspapers have been digitised, the majority of online archives end their coverage in 1900. The 19th Century British Library Newspaper Archive, which forms the key source for this study, cuts off on the 31 December 1900. This makes it difficult to explore the presence of America in Edwardian newspapers using similar digital methodologies. Whilst it is possible to track the publication of recurring journalistic genres (such as financial bulletins and American Humour columns) into the new century, it is not possible to trace the movement of specific words and texts across the ‘digital divide.’ Nor, with the exception of The Times, is it possible to extend culturoptic forms of analysis into the 1900s. In fact, many of the papers in the 19th Century British Library Newspaper Archive have issues missing for the final years of the nineteenth century (Fig 0.1). As a result, quantitative methodologies used in this study are focused on the period between 1871 and 1895. At first glance, this may seem like an unpromising focus for a study of Anglo-America relations. It was a period devoid of major political controversy. The Alabama Claims – in which the United States government controversially claimed damages from the British government for selling warships to the Confederacy – caused tensions between the two countries in the wake of the Civil War, but were settled in America’s favour in 1872 and soon receded from memory.77 It was not until 1895, when the United States intervened in a dispute between the British and Venezuelan governments, that transatlantic relations were once again soured by significant political tensions.78 However, far from being uneventful, the period between 1872 and 1895 was pivotal to the formation of modern Anglo-American relations. Connections between the two countries ‘thickened’ significantly; new forms

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78 Kathleen Burke, Old World, New World: 396-411.
of information began to flow across a seemingly shrunken Atlantic; the ‘hard’ politics of international diplomacy took a backseat to the ‘soft’ politics of cultural exchange; and ideological battle-lines were drawn that would shape the contours of Anglo-American relations long into the next century.

Fig 0.1 – Missing Issues in the 19th Century British Library Newspaper Archive. Red Squares indicate years in which issues of the paper are missing.
Chapter One
Creating the Contact Zone

“I wish we had more American news in our papers”, W.T. Stead complained to the editor of the *Northern Echo* in August 1870, “Gold at so much and cotton at so much – that is about all we get in our press.”79 A survey of the *Northern Echo* for that month gives substance to these frustrations. A full-text search for the terms ‘United States’, ‘New York’, or variations on the word ‘America’ returns a total of 110 results.80 The majority of these hits are drawn from the paper’s daily quota of financial and commercial bulletins summarising the previous day’s proceedings on the provincial and London stock exchanges.81 “American bonds have been steady”, began a paragraph from a typical report, “leaving off nearly ½ higher; Illinois, however, ½ lower; Eries unaltered; Atlantic and Great Western Mortgage Bonds receded 1 to 18. 20, but the Departures remain at 25, 7; Virginia Sixes nominally 5’s lower.” 82 Regular columns of shipping intelligence provided similarly dry reading; “Queenstown, August 23 – The City of Brooklyn, from New York, with 2,117,207 dollars specie, arrived to-day, and proceeded to Liverpool.”83 Brief snippets of American news were supplied by Reuter’s ‘Foreign News’ service, but the prohibitive cost of transatlantic telegraphy limited these articles to single-sentence statements on the price of railroad shares, the size of America’s national debt, and the result of a high-profile trial.84

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80 Full text search: “Americ* OR United States OR New York” in the *Northern Echo*, 1 August 1870 – 31 August 1870.
81 See Chapter 2 for more on financial bulletins.
82 *Northern Echo*, 5 August 1870: 2.
Echo occasionally printed lengthier articles and editorials on America but, along with clippings from the New York press, these transatlantic encounters did not form part of the everyday fabric of the newspaper. Nor, for that matter, were they a regular feature of the Echo’s rivals. In the late 1860s and early 1870s, most Victorian editors offered their readers a similar daily budget of “telegrams stating the price of gold, announcing the arrival of a steamship, or the election of Mr. A. in the place of Mr. B.” Major metropolitan titles such as The Times and the Daily Telegraph supplemented these perfunctory bulletins with weightier pieces of foreign correspondence, but even these articles focused predominantly on international politics, trade and finance. The result, Stead argued, was a national press that left its readers “deplorably ignorant” of life on the other side of the Atlantic.

They would not be ignorant for long. During the next two decades, a series of technological, social, and cultural forces combined to transform the press into a powerful transatlantic contact zone. This chapter outlines three of the most significant developments. Firstly, the expansion and maturation of high-speed transatlantic communications networks reshaped British perceptions of Atlantic time and space and allowed new forms of information to pass between the Old World and the New. Secondly, changes in the composition of Victorian newspapers (many of them inspired by the American press) allowed new representations of the

85 The most significant editorials on American were, in all likelihood, written by Stead himself, see: Northern Echo, 3 March 1870: 2; Northern Echo, 7 December 1870: 2. The number of editorials on America increased significant when Stead was unexpectedly appointed editor of the paper in 1871.
86 This quote comes from the first of a series of articles by Stead entitled ‘America and the Americans’, Northern Echo, 19 January 1871: 4. Subsequent instalments in the series: Northern Echo, 2 February 1871: 4; Northern Echo, 8 February 1871: 3; Northern Echo, 28 February 1871: 4; Northern Echo, 16 March 1871: 4; Northern Echo, 11 April 1871: 4.
United States to circulate across an increasingly diverse range of journalistic genres. In particular, the rise of ‘snippet journalism’ created new pathways of transatlantic exchange that encouraged the mass importation and recirculation of American print culture. Finally, an increase in literacy rates, disposable income, and leisure opportunities among the working and lower-middle classes contributed to an expansion of the British reading public which, in turn, allowed America to reach an increasingly broad audience. Crucially, as this chapter will argue, the democratic ethos and market sensitivity of late-Victorian ‘new journalism’ allowed this new mass audience to exert considerable influence over the style and content of the nation’s press. When newspapers increased and diversified their American coverage, they did so in direct response to market demand. Whilst editors, journalists, news agencies, and telegraph companies were central to the operation of the press as a transatlantic contact zone, their actions were also guided by the collective decisions of countless consumers.

Two additional areas of academic debate are of interest to this chapter. Firstly, it contributes to the burgeoning field of transnational studies. The study of history has long been organised around the boundaries of the nation state. The professionalization of history as a discipline was deeply embedded during the nineteenth century within the “business of nation building” and, whilst scholars have long since rejected the overt nationalism of this earlier historiography, one only has to visit an academic library to see categories such as ‘British History’ and ‘American History’ continuing to shape the contours of knowledge and research.\(^\text{89}\) In the last two decades, however, an increasing number of historians and literary critics have begun to challenge the primacy of national frameworks and explore historical processes and relationships that transcended the boundaries of the nation state.\(^\text{90}\) This is a process that assumed significant


dimensions in the modern world when new global communications facilitated heightened forms of interaction between nations. This transnational turn in humanities scholarship has inspired a range of new theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches. In particular, concepts such as ‘cultural transfer’, ‘connected histories’, ‘entangled histories’, and ‘histoire croisée’ are currently the subject of intensifying academic interest. Unlike comparative forms of transnational history, which separate units of comparison in order to establish similarities and differences between them, proponents of these new approaches have chosen to emphasise patterns of exchange and interconnection. Whilst there are subtle differences between ‘transfer’ and ‘entanglement’ methodologies they have a “common interest in the crossing of borders between nations, regions, continents or other spaces, in all kinds of encounters, perceptions, movements, relations and interactions between them, and in the way they perceived, influenced, stamped, and constituted one another.” Together, they seek to examine the transnational circulation of people, goods, capital, technologies, texts, tastes, and ideas, and to explore how these exchanges worked to bind cultures and societies together. This chapter argues that changes in the composition and readership of popular newspapers created new avenues of

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series by Columbia University Press and Palgrave Macmillan, the emergence of transnational research centres at universities such as UCL and St. Andrews, and the publication of Akira Iriye and Pierre-Yves Saunier (eds.), The Palgrave Dictionary of Transnational History, (Basingstoke, 2009).


92 Jürgen Kocka and Heinze-Gerhard Haupt, “Comparison and Beyond”: 19-20.
transnational cultural transfer and formed a textual ‘borderland’ in which geographically distant cultures intertwined. Whilst this study focuses on the press as a transatlantic contact zone, it invites future studies to consider the role played by newspapers and periodicals in shaping similar encounters, exchanges, and dialogues between late-Victorian Britain and other cultures and societies that lay beyond the country’s national boundaries.93

Secondly, the chapter offers new perspectives on the history of ‘Americanization’.94 In particular, it challenges established chronologies which have emphasized the importance of the post-1945 period in the formation of new cultural relations between America and the rest of the world.95 Howard Malchow argues that this later era was the time when “personal and media connection [between Britain and America] most thickened.”96 He attributes this “vast increase in contact” to the emergence of affordable air travel and an “unparalleled growth in the density of transatlantic media” including the radio, phonograph, and television.97 At first glance, his interpretative model makes sense – the 1950s and 1960s endure in our collective imaginations as the home of Coca-Cola, rock ‘n’ roll, blue jeans, jukeboxes, Disneyland, McDonalds, Madison

93 Indeed, the role played by newspapers in shaping the relationship between Britain and her Imperial territories has already been explored by Chandrika Kaul, Reporting the Raj: The British Press and India, c. 1880-1922, (Manchester, 2003); Chandrika Kaul (ed.), Media and the British Empire, (Basingstoke, 2006); Simon Potter, News and the British World: The Emergence of an Imperial Press System, (Oxford, 2003); Simon Potter (ed.), Newspapers and Empire in Ireland and Britain: reporting the British Empire, c1857-1921, (Dublin, 2004).


96 Howard Malchow, Special Relations: 1.

97 Howard Malchow, Special Relations: 1.
Avenue, Elvis Presley, Marilyn Monroe and other potent icons of modern American mass culture. However, whilst the second half of the twentieth century formed an important chapter in the history of Anglo-American cultural relations, it would be misleading to characterise these decades as constituting a dramatic break with the past. A similar ‘thickening’ of transatlantic connections took place in the early twentieth century and, as this study seeks to elucidate, during the final quarter of the nineteenth century. Whilst the products of this earlier contact zone have long-since faded from memory, their emergence on the late-Victorian cultural scene was equally significant as the Big Macs and blockbusters that followed in their wake.

Connection

The history of transatlantic relations is punctuated by symbolic moments of rupture and connection. Christopher Columbus’s arrival in the Americas in 1492, and the voyage of the Mayflower in 1620, are commemorated in American culture as watershed moments in the country’s history; points at which new connections were symbolically established between the Old World and the New. By contrast, the Boston Tea Party and the signing of the Declaration of Independence are celebrated as events in which political, cultural, economic, and emotional ties with Britain were severed; moments of rupture which set the tone for a new period of Anglo-American disconnection. An equally symbolic, though now largely forgotten, moment in transatlantic relations occurred on 5 August 1858. It was on this day that the completion of the first transatlantic telegraph cable established a physical link between the high-speed communications networks of Europe and America. Whilst it had once taken over a week to

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carry information from Britain to the United States, the first official message to be sent along the cable was transmitted in approximately 35 minutes. “Europe and America are united by telegraph”, it ran, “Glory to God in the Highest; on earth peace, good will towards men.”

The transatlantic press was in no doubt as to the profound significance of the event. Articles forecasting the dawn of a new age in Anglo-American relations were published by newspapers on both sides of the Atlantic and are worth quoting at length in order to appreciate the cultural and political significance that contemporaries attached to this moment. Under an eye-catching headline reading “The World Revolution Begun”, the New York Herald confidently proclaimed that the arrival of the cable marked:

the starting point of the civilization of the latter half of the nineteenth century... The magnetic telegraph ceases to be a local, and becomes an instrument of universal power. It grasps the thought of man, and carries it instantaneously to the utmost confines of civilization. Henceforth the whole world is to be moved simultaneously by the same thought, and action will be immeasurably quickened. In political intercourse there is to be no waiting for intelligence... In commerce there is to be no more waiting for mails with market advices. In science, art, literature, and every branch of knowledge, every event that will quicken the human intellect, every discovery that will confer new power on man, will be at once communicated... The Atlantic Cable will carry its influence into every man’s house, business and bosom.

“Since the discovery of Columbus”, echoed the London Times,

nothing has been done in any degree comparable to the vast enlargement which has thus been given to the sphere of human activity.... Distance.... is annihilated. For the purposes of mutual communication and of good understanding the Atlantic is dried up, and we become in reality as well as in wish one country... [The cable] has half undone the Declaration of 1775, and gone far to make us one again, in spite of ourselves, one people. To the ties of a common blood, language, and religion, to the intimate association in business and a complete sympathy on so many subjects, is now added the faculty of instantaneous communication, which must give to all these tendencies to unity an intensity which they never before could possess.

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101 The Times, 18 August 1858: 7.
102 New York Herald, 6 August 1858: 4.
103 The Times, 6 August 1858: 8.
“THERE IS NO MORE SEA!”, summarised the excitable Boston *Liberator*, “ENGLAND AND AMERICA FACE TO FACE!”

Both the *New York Herald* and the London *Times* were quick to point out the key role that journalism would play in mediating this new age of international communications. “The first revolution will be made in the press”, argued the American paper. “[We] look confidently forward to the time when the *Herald* will contain, besides its local and city intelligence and advertisements, nothing but a mass of faithful telegraphic reports of the events in the whole world of the previous day.” Similarly, *The Times* forecasted that “within a very short period we shall be able to present to our readers every morning intelligence of what happened the day before in every quarter of the globe.” Here, in the predictions of its editors, we begin to see the potential of the late-Victorian press as a powerful new kind of transatlantic contact zone – one that was built around speed and the possibilities of instantaneous communication; one that annihilated perceptions of Atlantic time and space; and one that worked to break down barriers between British and American discourse and unite geographically separated readers into a shared transatlantic consciousness.

For all of its dramatic symbolism, the completion of the first Atlantic cable turned out to be a false dawn. The reliability of the line deteriorated quickly and, less than a month after its completion, it ceased to work entirely. While several attempts were made to establish a new connection, it was not until 1866 that a working cable was permanently established between Ireland and Newfoundland. Not to be deterred by past disappointments, newspapers in Britain and America once again forecasted the dawn of a new era. *Freedom’s Champion*, a weekly paper published in Kansas, drew upon a familiar range of themes:

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104 *The Liberator* (Boston), 13 August 1858: 3. The excitement proved too much for the editor of the *Daily Cleveland Herald* who assumed the role of a lovesick teenager and ran the story under the heading “England and America Forever.” *Daily Cleveland Herald*, 5 August 1858: 2.
106 *The Times*, 6 August 1858: 8.
The ocean is spanned; storms cannot delay nor calms retard the thoughts which one continent speaks to another; we shall hereafter read in the morning papers at breakfast the news of events transpiring in Europe the day before; the two great Nations speaking the same language have annihilated space and time, and will henceforth talk to each other as friends standing side by side.\footnote{Freedom’s Champion, 2 August 1866: 2.}

This time the cable lived up to its promise. Within a matter of days, newspapers on both sides of the Atlantic began to supplement columns of ship-born foreign intelligence with brief fragments of news gathered under the heading “By Atlantic Telegraph”.\footnote{See: The Essex Standard, 3 August 1866: 4; Daily News, 17 August 1866: 4; Morning Post, 8 November 1866: 5; Glasgow Herald, 9 November 1866: 5; Morning Post, 8 December 1866: 5; Blackburn Standard, 12 December 1866: 2; Bristol Mercury, 15 December 1866: 3.}

These early bulletins soon assumed the pattern outlined by Stead: political developments, the comings and goings of steamships, and the changing price of gold, cotton, and other key commodities made up the majority of traffic. A typical series of bulletins published in the Pall Mall Gazette ran: “The Democratic party have carried the elections in Maryland and Delaware. The Republicans have been victorious in New Jersey and will probably be successful in the State of New York. The Hamburg-American Company’s steamship Borussia has arrived out.”\footnote{Pall Mall Gazette, 8 November 1866: 6.} The accelerated transmission of this information had important implications for Victorian readers who took a personal or professional interest in the American economy – it was now possible for British traders, manufacturers, and shareholders to respond almost instantaneously to market fluctuations in New York and identify new business opportunities in America before the chance to exploit them had passed. However, if we return to the prediction made by Freedom’s Champion, it would be misleading to suggest that these dry, factual bulletins amounted to a conversation between “two great Nations” conducted as if they were “friends standing side by side”.\footnote{Freedom’s Champion, 2 August 1866: 2.} The cable may well have created important new connections between the mercantile classes of Britain and America, but, as Stead’s own frustration attests, it was not yet equipped to establish a meaningful dialogue between the man on the Clapham omnibus and his Yankee equivalent on the Chicago street car.
The ability of the Atlantic cable to establish new forms of transatlantic exchange was chiefly limited by its high cost and low capacity. The 1866 cable transmitted information at the relatively sluggish pace of 8 words per minute; even with the addition of a second cable several months later, this was not sufficient to meet the demand of all the businesses and individuals who wished to send information across the Atlantic. In order to prevent the cable from exceeding its daily capacity (and to recoup the costs of its development) the Anglo-American Cable Company charged its customers extortionately high prices. Initially, rates between London and New York were set at a minimum of £20 for a twenty word message (including address, date, and signature). Additional words were charged at twenty shillings for every five letters, figures were written as words, and messages in cipher were charged double.¹¹¹ Even when these rates were reduced a year later, the cost of sending a message was still prohibitively high. Unsurprisingly, news agencies such as Reuters focused their resources on transmitting the most essential pieces of factual intelligence and attempted to keep messages brief.

These restrictions stripped even the most dramatic news stories of colour and sensation. On 4 September 1870, for example, “an immense fire” broke out in Chicago and destroyed an entire block of the city. The editor of the *Milwaukee Daily Sentinel* reached for his thesaurus, described the event as a “Fearful Carnival of Conflagration and Catastrophe”, and printed a vivid eye-witness account of the fire’s destructive progress:

[A wall] fell with one prolonged and deafening crash, and the men went down with it to their fiery graves. A wail went up from the crowd, a strange, indescribable cry, or sob, that spoke of horror and dismay... In an instant they had disappeared, crushed between the ponderous walls or suffocated in the flames. Horrible to hear and see... The terrible catastrophe seemed for a time to deprive people of their reason. Shrieks of women were heard from balconies where they were standing to look upon the dreadful scene.¹¹²

By contrast, when news of the disaster reached Britain via one of Reuter’s daily transatlantic bulletins it merely informed readers that “a fire occurred at Chicago yesterday, causing a loss of

¹¹¹ The rates were widely reported in the British press. See: *The Bristol Mercury*, 4 August 1886: 3; *The Standard*, 28 July 1866: 3; *The Bury and Norwich Post*, 31 July 1866: 3.

three million dollars.”¹¹³ This transatlantic ‘Gradgrindery’ meant that the cable was attuned to the transmission of facts and calculations, but resistant to the literary charms of fancy, romance, wonder, and sentiment.¹¹⁴ In the first years of its existence, no jokes, no gossip, and no human interest stories were sent along its wires. It was dedicated to the discourse of profitable enterprise, but lacked the depth, subtlety, and levity required to facilitate more popular forms of transatlantic cultural exchange.

Over the next two decades, however, technological and economic restrictions began to slacken. The laying of additional cables by rival companies increased the number of messages which could be sent across the Atlantic and stimulated competition over cable rates. A third line, backed by Reuter’s news agency, was established between France and the United States in August 1869. On the 7 August, the French Atlantic Telegraph Company placed an advertisement in The Times announcing that their tariff would significantly undercut the £2 minimum charge now levied by the operator of the original cable.¹¹⁵ They offered rates of 32s. for a ten-word message, with 3s. 3d. charged for each additional word. Not to be undercut, the Anglo American Telegraph Company printed their own advertisement immediately below it announcing that their rates had been reduced to 30s. for a ten-word message, with 3s. charged for additional words.¹¹⁶ Both companies offered to transmit press messages at half price. However, this period of competition was short lived. In 1873, the French company was taken over by Anglo American and the market returned to a state of monopoly. In 1874, a similar attempt was made by the Direct United States Cable Company to establish a new connection between Britain and America, but this venture also came under the control of Anglo American three years later. It was not until the late 1870s and

¹¹³ The Morning Post, 6 September 1870: 5.
¹¹⁶ The Times, 7 August 1869: 8.
early 1880s that a series of new companies managed to establish a rival presence in the market.\textsuperscript{117} Whilst the establishment of multinational cartels limited the scope for competition, the establishment of rival lines nevertheless led to a significant increase in capacity and a marked decrease in rates.\textsuperscript{118}

By the early 1880s, the emergence of a more mature transatlantic telegraph market had begun to reshape the ways in which American news was reported in Victorian papers. Firstly, the volume of information sent to newspapers via Atlantic cable increased significantly. As Chapter Two explores, the financial intelligence supplied to British papers by Reuter’s transatlantic business service increased from a few brief lines stating the price of gold and cotton to lengthy columns summarising the previous day’s business on the New York stock exchange. Whilst this change happened incrementally during the 1870s and 1880s, the launch of Reuter’s dedicated ‘American Markets’ bulletin in 1881 was a watershed moment in which a clearly demarcated space for the coverage of American commerce was established in many British papers.\textsuperscript{119} Political telegrams and other pieces of general news also arrived in greater numbers; by the end of the 1880s, it became increasingly rare to encounter a daily newspaper which did not devote a portion of its ‘Foreign Intelligence’ columns to reporting the latest news from the United States.

Digital archives allow us to explore these developments from a quantitative perspective. Fig 1.1 shows the results of a keyword search for ‘Americ*’ or ‘United States’ across a sample of 29 British papers published between 1850 and 1896.\textsuperscript{120} Whilst it would be unwise to place too much

\textsuperscript{117} La Compagnie Française Du Télégraphe Du Paris À New York established a link between France and America in 1879. The American Telegraph & Cable Company created a line between Ireland and Newfoundland in 1881. The Commercial Cable Company laid a cable between Nova Scotia and Ireland in 1884. Another burst of new cables were created after 1894. For a detailed timeline, see: http://www.atlantic-cable.com/Cables/CableTimeLine/atlantic.htm [accessed 12/02/2012].

\textsuperscript{118} See Dwayne R. Winseck and Robert M. Pike, \textit{Communication and Empire}, ch. 2 for an in depth analysis of competition and collaboration between different telegraph companies.

\textsuperscript{119} The launch of the ‘American Market’s bulletin and the United States’ growing financial presence in the Victorian press is discussed at length in chapter two.

interpretative weight on this rudimentary form of ‘culturomics’, the pattern presented by the results is worth noting. As we might expect, references to America increased dramatically during the early 1860s as British papers reported on the progress of the Civil War. In the late 1860s, as the conflict gradually receded from view, references to America experienced a slight decline. Interestingly, the opening of the first commercially viable Atlantic cable in 1866 does not appear to have stimulated a significant upsurge in American coverage; the new technology, it would seem, did not have an immediately transformative impact upon the fabric of British newspapers. References to America increased steadily during the 1870s before spiking dramatically between the years 1879 and 1881. In 1881, references to America were 41% higher than they had been in 1878. It is difficult to pinpoint the causes of this sudden growth; unlike the early 1860s, the figures were not distorted by the presence of a major American news event. Subsequent sections of this thesis suggest a range of possible explanations for this phenomenon, including the growth of snippet journalism and escalating concerns about Anglo-American competition. However, the spike does coincide with the expansion of the transatlantic telegraph network and it is likely that this ‘thickening’ of connections between Britain and America made a significant contribution to the increased frequency with which the United States was referenced in Victorian newspapers.

Finally, it is important to stress that improvements in the cost and capacity of transatlantic telegraphy also had a qualitative impact upon British coverage of American affairs. The first generation of bulletins transmitted by Reuter’s along the Atlantic cable rarely exceeded more than one or two sentences. They provided the factual core of a story but offered little in terms of context, detail, or editorial explanation. In order to obtain a complete picture of a story it was still necessary to await the arrival of steamships bearing reports from foreign correspondents and copies of the New York press. However, as the cost of transatlantic telegraphy decreased, it became financially viable for major metropolitan dailies such as The Standard to transmit lengthier forms of correspondence over the cable. In 1881 (a date that continues to loom large in this study) the paper introduced a new column of telegraphic American news under the
subheading “From Our Correspondent”. In sharp contrast to Reuter’s slender missives, the first instalment consumed what would have previously been considered a woefully spendthrift 636 words. The bulk of the column was devoted to a strike among New York brewers, but included incidental asides on the drinking habits of the city’s German population, the celebration of Whit-Monday, and the similarities between American lager beer and London stout. Once this story had been concluded, the correspondent moved on to describe a strike among railroad labourers, the construction of New York’s underground railway, the proceeds of a sensational divorce case, the results of a Senatorial Election, a summary of an editorial published by the New York World, and the indifferent response exhibited by the American public to news of troubles in Ireland. The message was sent from New York on a Wednesday evening and appeared on the shelves of British newsagents on Thursday morning. The next day, a fresh bulletin appeared featuring news about Senatorial debates on international copyright, the unmasking of a man who had successfully impersonated the brother of a British Lord, the latest developments in the aforementioned divorce case, the increased availability of bank loans, and a gang of fraudsters operating on Wall-street.

This eclectic range of political coverage, economic news, local reporting, human interest stories and gossip was symptomatic of a new kind of discourse that was beginning to take place over the newly expanded transatlantic telegraph network. Bare fact had begun to give way to cultural embellishment; profit had ceded ground to pleasure. These developments did not go unnoticed. In March 1882, the Dundee Courier reprinted an exchange between two New York papers under the heading ‘The Use of the Atlantic Cable’:

George W. Smalley, the representative in London of the New York Tribune, telegraphs to that journal that Mrs Langtry’s “ankles are slender.” Upon this the New York Independent

121 The first instalment appeared in The Standard, 9 June 1881: 5 under the heading ‘The United States’. It appeared on the same page, and under the same header, each day for the remainder of the century
122 The Standard, 9 June 1881: 5.
123 The Standard, 10 June 1881: 5.
exclaims, “Let us thank Heaven and Cyrus Field that we have the Atlantic Cable, so that we can have this fact telegraphed to us, and not have to wait for it come by mail.”

The Independent’s sarcastic response suggests a sense of mild outrage that one of the greatest technological achievements of the age was being used to convey frivolous gossip. When The Times and the New York Herald announced the dawning of a shared Anglo-American consciousness, they made idealistic allusions to technological progress and peace everlasting; it is unlikely that their utopian vision included the diameter of Lillie Langtry’s ankles, yet arguably it was the sharing of such mundane details over the course of the next two decades that transformed the idea of America in the British imagination and helped to shape a more intimate relationship between the two countries. The Atlantic cable, far from being trivialised by a pursuit of celebrity gossip, human interest stories, and other pieces of miscellaneous tittle-tattle, proved to be a key medium of social and cultural exchange. Here, at last, we see the people of Britain and America truly beginning to “talk to each other as friends standing side by side.”

In place of a dialogue of disjointed messages relating to the price of gold or the movements of steamships, they began to crack jokes, tell stories, swap gossip, express emotions and share the quotidian details of everyday life. By the 1880s, the transatlantic telegraph network had begun to facilitate this new form of dialogue between British and American culture. Its electrified wires carried thousands of words across the Atlantic each day. However, as the next section of this chapter explores, the formation of the press as an Anglo-American contact zone was equally dependent on another, altogether less glamorous, method of transatlantic communication: the snippet.

**Snippet Journalism**

Before the advent of transatlantic telegraphy, there was a more laborious, physical movement of information between the Old World and the New. Packets of American newspapers and

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124 *Dundee Courier*, 8 March 1882: 3. Cyrus Field was an American financier who played a key role in laying the Atlantic cable.

125 *Freedom’s Champion*, 2 August 1866: 2.
correspondence were sent on board each ship that sailed from New York; British newspapers arranged for their operatives to meet vessels as they arrived in Liverpool (sometimes before they even landed), collect their cargo, and rush it back to the office. At this point, editors and subeditors would pour through the pages of the American press in search of significant news stories, interesting opinions, and other pieces of information that had potential appeal for readers. Much of this research was reduced to a brief précis of key American events, but some items were also clipped from the imported papers and pasted directly into the British press. It is tempting to assume that this laborious system of transatlantic exchange – based, as it was, on the old technologies of paper, ink, steam, scissors, and glue – was superseded by the directness and speed of the Atlantic cable. As we have seen, this was increasingly true of news coverage; by the 1880s, even the most prosaic developments in American politics and society were reported throughout Britain the following morning. For the most part, information transmitted via the cable was time sensitive. The value of a breaking news story or a financial bulletin deteriorated by the hour; even the most frivolous accounts of New York society shed relevance and public appeal with each passing day. It is unsurprising, therefore, that British editors began to transmit these stories via the cable as soon as it became financially viable.

However, it is important to recognise that not all articles published in the late-Victorian press were subject to the same temporal pressures. Faced by the commercial pressures of an increasingly competitive marketplace, and mindful of the evolving tastes of an expanding reading public, an increasing number of British editors began to modify the content of their paper. As Mark Hampton argues, successful editors quickly realised that their audiences “cared less about Home Rule or Bulgarian atrocities” than they did about “football scores, divorce cases, murder trials, and fashionable dresses”. As a result, parliamentary reports, political editorials, and lengthy summaries of local news gradually gave way to serialised fiction, household tips, travelogues, children’s pages, gardening advice, interesting facts, poetry, competitions, comic

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clippings, and other ‘miscellanies’ of entertaining, bite-sized items.\footnote{127} The transformation of the press from a “sedate organ of enlightenment and instruction” into a vehicle of mass entertainment can be traced back to the 1850s and 1860s when the abolition of stamp duty allowed popular weekly papers such as Lloyd’s and Reynolds’s to target a new audience.\footnote{128} However, as Martin Conboy points out, these developments took on a new significance in the 1880s as they began to transcend the pages of the Sunday press and reshape the aims and audience of daily journalism.\footnote{129}

The “herald of [this] new regime” was a weekly magazine named Tit-Bits.\footnote{130} Launched in the autumn of 1881 by George Newnes, it has since been identified by journalists, critics, and press historians as a watershed publication in the development of modern mass journalism.\footnote{131} Indeed, the circumstances in which it was conceived have passed into journalistic folklore.\footnote{132} “The origin of [modern journalism] can be traced to a railway carriage travelling between two dirty midland towns,” argued Ifor Evans in 1930:

Inside a third class carriage was an alert young man [Newnes] who had bought a Manchester evening paper to read on his homeward journey. Amid the arid columns of political debate he found one short news item that attracted him, an account of a railway accident in which two children in a runaway wagon had been saved by the intelligence of a stationmaster and a passenger.\footnote{133}

“‘Now that is what I call a tit-bit!’” he remarked to his wife, although this part of the story comes from Harold Herd’s alternate version which locates the action in Newnes’ home rather than a railway carriage. “‘Why doesn’t somebody bring out a paper containing nothing but tit-bits like

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\textsuperscript{127} A case study of this process for the Hampshire Telegraph appears in Chapter Three.

\textsuperscript{128} Martin Conboy, The Press and Popular Culture: 94-95.

\textsuperscript{129} Martin Conboy, The Press and Popular Culture: 95.

\textsuperscript{130} For histories of Tit-Bits, see: Kate Jackson, George Newnes and the New Journalism in Britain: Culture and Profit, (Aldershot, 2001); Kate Jackson, ‘The Tit-Bits Phenomenon: George Newnes, New Journalism and the Periodical Texts’, Victorian Periodicals Review, 30:3, (1997): 201-206.


\textsuperscript{132} Anon, “Fleet Street Refashioned”, The Saturday Review, 143:3727 (1927), 512: (512).

this?” Convinced that a publication filled with “trivial human anecdotes” and other easily digestible snippets of information would be a commercial success, Newnes tried in vain to secure capital for his venture and eventually resorted to financing the paper himself through the unlikely method of establishing a vegetarian restaurant. The first issue of the paper was eventually published in October 1881 and reportedly sold five thousand copies in Manchester in its first two hours. After three years of strong growth, Newnes moved his headquarters from Manchester to London and soon achieved a national circulation of between 400,000 and 600,000 copies per week; a readership which made *Tit-Bits* one of the bestselling publications in the country and established Newnes as one of the period’s most successful and influential editors.

Newnes’ success had a clear influence on some of the period’s most successful publications. This found its most immediate expression in two of *Tit-Bits* closest competitors. Alfred Harmsworth (the eventual Lord Northcliffe and founder of the *Daily Mail*) worked for Newnes before launching *Answers to Correspondents* as a direct competitor to *Tit-Bits* in 1888. Similarly, Cyril Arthur Pearson (founder of the *Daily Express*) received his first break in journalism by winning a *Tit-Bits* competition in 1884 and went on to found *Pearson’s Weekly* as its competitor in 1890. This new paper, reported *The Pall Mall Gazette*, “will be 50 per cent larger than *Tit-Bits*, and will be ‘run’ on the principle of doing everything at least 50 per cent better than

134 Harold Herd, *The Making of Modern Journalism*; Herd’s account is summarised in: Anon, “Fleet Street Refashioned”: 512. Several other variations of Newnes’ eureka moment have also been published. Rather appropriately, the anecdote appeared as a tit-bit in magazines and newspapers all over the world. For a detailed (and almost Homeric) account of *Tit-Bits’* inception, see: Hulda Friederichs, *The Life of Sir George Newnes*, (London, 1911), chapter 4.

135 B. Ifor Evans, “The Rise of Modern Journalism”: 234. The key values around which Newnes supposedly designed his restaurant, ‘The Vegetarian Company’s Saloon’, were remarkably similar to those which informed his first foray into newspaper publishing. Both, his biographer insists, aimed to provide good, wholesome nourishment to hardworking people in an unpretentious environment and at a low price. See: Hulda Friederichs, *The Life of Sir George Newnes*: 61-64.


Tit-Bits. Circulation figures suggest that both Answers and Pearson’s at least matched the popularity of Newnes’ periodical; Kate Jackson estimates that all three publications sold, on average, between 400,000 and 600,000 copies per week. Whilst there were subtle differences in the style, content, and intended audience of each magazine, all drew heavily upon the format pioneered by Tit-Bits.

However, to focus purely on major metropolitan periodicals would be to miss the true reach of this new form of journalism. During the 1880s and 1890s, a range of daily and weekly newspapers in London and the provinces began to redesign themselves along what might be termed ‘Tit-Bitian’ lines. Whilst several provincial newspapers, such as the Manchester Times, introduced a weekly supplement of serialised fiction, household columns, and other items of miscellany during the 1870s, this process expanded and accelerated in subsequent decades. In newspapers throughout the country, political debate and local news gradually gave way to Tit-Bit style supplements filled with jokes, anecdotes, scientific facts, fashion columns, children’s corners, and serialised fiction. The Hampshire Telegraph, to identify just one example of this trend, transformed itself in September 1883 from a bi-weekly publication chiefly concerned with local and naval news, into a Saturday weekly with a four-page supplement. Local and naval news still dominated the first two thirds of the paper, but the supplement was filled with entertaining new features; society gossip, cuttings from Punch, chapter one of a serialised story entitled ‘The Artist’s Daughter’, a ladies’ column, book extracts, nature and science paragraphs, gardening advice, a recipe for ‘Meat Puffs’, and a sporting column devoted to tricycles. Similar patterns played out around the country as editors scrambled to attract readers who, in the words of Conboy, “wanted their newspapers as companions” rather than instructors.

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140 Kate Jackson, “The Tit-Bits Phenomenon”: 203.
141 Hampshire Telegraph, 29 September 1883.
The Tit-Bitization of the press presented editors with an immediate logistical problem – where was all of this new content to be found? Recurring features such as parliamentary coverage, economic bulletins and local news had provided British newspapers with a reliable stream of new material. The periodicity of politics and the stock market harmonised with the rhythms of the daily press; the arrival of each new issue brought a fresh day of political debate, a batch of international intelligence, and an updated list of stock prices. However, the miscellaneous content of Tit-Bitian supplements did not regenerate with the same predictability; they were, for the most part, products of the imagination rather than direct responses to current events. Whilst their lack of periodicity made these texts more flexible and more durable, it also made them less reliable as a source of daily content. In order to secure a regular supply of miscellany, British editors resorted to a range of different strategies. Firstly, well-resourced metropolitan publications, such as The Graphic, commissioned works of serialised fiction directly from high-profile authors. Provincial papers, on the other hand, obtained cheaper literary materials from syndication companies such as Tillotson’s Fiction Bureau. Rather than pay for original material, other papers encouraged readers to submit their own content. Newnes, for example, encouraged his readers to send in their own favourite extracts in the hope of winning the one-guinea prize awarded by the magazine’s weekly ‘Prize Tit-Bit’ competition. Similarly, the Northern Weekly Gazette in Middlesbrough invited readers to send in their favourite jokes, recipes, short stories, and press clippings and incentivized the process by printing the names and addresses of successful contributors in the paper. This process not only provided a steady stream of new content for popular newspapers but provided editors with a powerful new tool for monitoring the changing tastes of their audience.

Whilst syndication companies and reader competitions provided an important source of content for many papers, the majority of late-Victorian editors obtained their material through less honest channels. The masthead of *Tit-Bits* informed readers that its contents were sourced “from all the most interesting books, periodicals, and newspapers in the world.”

Nothing, in other words, was original; all of the articles published in the magazine were clipped from other texts. Rather than employ a staff of writers and reporters, Newnes instructed his team of ‘journalists’ to sift through piles of publications gathered from every corner of the English-speaking world in search of interesting or entertaining content. Whenever a usable tit-bit was discovered, it was cut from its original text and (eventually) pasted into the new magazine. This process was not unique to Newnes’ publication; in British and American newspaper offices, similar tasks were performed by dedicated ‘exchange editors’.

British papers obtained their clippings from an eclectic range of sources. Many came from domestic publications. Major metropolitan morning papers such as *The Times*, *The Standard*, and the *Daily News* provided their evening and provincial rivals with a regular source of foreign correspondence and editorial debate, whilst satirical magazines such as *Punch* and *Fun* were systematically plundered in order to fill the comic columns of the weekly press.

American print culture also provided British editors with a regular supply of entertaining miscellany. Jokes, comic sketches, human interest pieces, crime reports, society gossip, travel writing, short stories, and the racy quips of American journalists all found their way into the pages of the British press on a regular basis. Tracking the sources of these snippets is difficult; *Tit-Bits*, along with many of its imitators, printed its articles without attribution. Whilst it is possible to trace the origins of some snippets using keyword searches, the vast majority of newspapers and

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144 *Tit-Bits*, 22 October 1881: 1.
145 Edwin L. Shuman, *Practical Journalism: a complete manual of the best newspaper methods*, (New York, 1908): 98. The title ‘exchange editor’ was typically used in America, whilst the more general term ‘subeditor’ was applied the same position in Britain. The term ‘exchange editor’ is preferred in this thesis.
magazines have yet to be digitised. Among the British papers who openly acknowledged the provenance of their American imports, the Detroit Free Press, the major dailies of Boston, Chicago, and New York, and the satirical magazines Puck and Judge appear to have been particularly popular. In many cases, it is even difficult to ascertain whether an unattributed snippet came from a British or American source; minor spelling differences, the casual use of American slang and place names, or the appearance of the word “dollars” instead of “pounds” often stand out as the only clues to an extract’s transatlantic provenance. This ability of American print culture to move so freely into popular British discourse is highly significant. As Wiener has demonstrated, by the 1880s, British and American newspapers were drawing upon a shared repertoire of new journalistic techniques (many of them pioneered in the United States) in order to attract the attention of broadly similar reading publics. The cultural compatibility created by the emergence of a shared transatlantic print industry was an important component of the press’ power as an Anglo-American contact zone. The work of American writers, journalists, and humourists was, for the most part, as intelligible to British audiences as it was to its domestic readers. Texts and ideas flowed freely. There was rarely any need for translation, adjustment, or explanation; a snip of the shears and a dab of paste was all it took to bridge the Atlantic.

Americanization

Over the course of the twentieth century, British attitudes to Americanization have developed in response to the United States’ emergence as a global superpower and Britain’s relative decline on the world stage. Within this context of shifting power relations, the international circulation of American popular culture has often been equated with cultural imperialism; a way for the United States to promote its values, enhance its political power, and

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146 For a case study of keyword searches can be used to map the transnational movements of words, texts, people, and ideas, see: Bob Nicholson, “You Kick the Bucket; We Do The Rest!”

conquer new markets. Terms such as ‘coca-colonisation’, ‘Disneyfication’, and ‘McDonalization’ have been used to describe (and invariably condemn) the ways in which America has ‘invaded’ foreign cultures. This perspective grants the United States a high degree of coercive agency; the recurring trope of ‘invasion’ strongly implies that ‘Americanization’ is something that has been deliberately and strategically done to the rest of the world in order to further US interests. This perspective casts foreign audiences as passive victims lacking the necessary agency to resist the tide of Americanization and allowing their own ‘authentic’ forms of popular culture to be ‘colonized’ by the mass-produced, ‘inauthentic’ products of the American economic juggernaut.

There is considerable evidence to support this view for the twentieth century; the American film industry’s hegemonic control of world film production after the First World War and what Rydell and Kroes describe as the ‘cultural onslaught occasioned by the Marshall Plan’ after the Second World War, are the two most obvious examples.

It is tempting, therefore, to interpret the mass importation of transatlantic print culture during the late-Victorian period as an early example of America’s political and economic imperialism. Indeed, subsequent chapters of this thesis argue that the circulation of American press clippings, jokes and slang terms during the nineteenth century helped stimulate a taste for

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148 For a summary of this scholarship, see the introduction to Howard Malchow, Special Relations.
150 This concept of a mass ‘culture industry’ was most notably evinced by the Frankfurt school of Marxist cultural theory, particularly in Theodore W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, Dialectic of Enlightenment, (1947), trans. by Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, 2002). For a summary of this scholarship and its position on American mass culture, see John Storey, An Introductory Guide to Cultural Theory and Popular Culture, (London, 1993): 20-41, 100-110. See also Japp Kooijman, Fabricating the absolute fake: America in contemporary pop culture, (Amsterdam, 2008): 11; Robert Rydell and Rob Kroes, Buffalo Bill in Bologna: 175-188.
transatlantic cultural imports that would later be exploited by Hollywood cinema. However, the underlying dynamics of nineteenth-century transatlantic cultural exchange do not support the case for American imperialism as readily as their twentieth-century counterparts. The key distinction centres on a question of agency. During the twentieth century, we can find evidence to show that movie studios, record labels, and fast-food companies exported American cultural products to foreign markets in search of greater profits, and that the American government actively supported wider campaigns to spread American culture. The majority of writers, journalists, editors, and publishers responsible for producing and distributing nineteenth-century American print culture however did not target foreign audiences so deliberately. The absence of a rigorously enforced international copyright law made it difficult for American authors to distribute their work profitably on the other side of the Atlantic.¹⁵² Whilst major literary figures like Mark Twain were able to negotiate lucrative deals with British publishers, most American journalists and newspaper editors were unable to secure similar arrangements. When a clipping from the New York Herald was printed by The Times, or a joke from Puck appeared in the humour columns of the Hampshire Telegraph, no money changed hands. With the exception of the Detroit Free Press, which successfully launched a London edition in 1881, the majority of American newspapers had no financial motive to target British markets. As a result, they exercised little agency over the exportation and consumption of material.

Indeed, the phrase ‘exportation’ is ill-suited to describe the transatlantic circulation of print during the nineteenth-century. Snippet journalism is better understood as essentially a process of importation in which the agency of consumers was paramount. The idea of the consumer in this particular context functions at two interrelated levels: British editors and exchange editors represented the first level in which American material was ‘consumed’ or transmitted by British newspapers but nonetheless subjected to a high degree of critical

mediation; at the second level, there is evidence to suggest that British readers had an appetite for American print culture since they exercised a significant influence over the type of content offered in popular newspapers and the regular appearance of American material could not have been justified on commercial grounds were it not for this demand. Readers’ tastes were constantly monitored by editors, and successful publications prided themselves on keeping abreast of popular tastes. Critics and defenders of the new journalism differed on many points, but were agreed on at least one; they all recognised that, for good or ill, mass-circulation papers maintained close ties to their readers’ tastes and values. ‘We must write for our public,’ the cynical editor of a popular newspaper admits in Gissing’s Born in Exile (1892).  

Matthew Arnold, the principal critic of new journalism, deplored the fact that American and British editors of these new popular papers were, to quote Weiner, “solely aiming to satisfy the visceral needs of their readers.” W.T. Stead, on the other hand, had his own way of describing what he saw as a positive symbiosis: the modern press was “at once the eye and ear and the tongue of the people. It is the visible speech if not the voice of democracy. It is the phonograph of the world.” The movement of print, in other words, was not driven by the commercial strategies of American authors and publishers eager to target new British readerships; it was orchestrated by the professional judgements of exchange editors, described by one contemporary as “the men who wrote with shears”, and then by the consumer demands of British readers. Exchange editors arranged for the regular delivery of American newspapers and periodicals, sifted them for interesting material, clipped out promising extracts (and, by the same token, ignored others), selected snippets for publication, and finally determined how these American imports would be presented to readers. Readers either confirmed these choices by continuing to buy and read the papers, or rejected them by purchasing others. The most pervasive form of American popular

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156 This colourful phrase is adapted from Edwin L. Shuman, Practical Journalism: 98.
culture to circulate in late-Victorian Britain, in other words, was not the product of an unwanted, imperialistic invasion but mediated by British consumers.

The idea of Americanization however has never been solely associated with America’s ability to ride roughshod over the interests of localised consumers in order to produce, advertise and distribute its capitalist products to the world. From the late nineteenth century onwards, the term became associated with a perceived threat to British and European cultural values and hierarchies. In essence, American culture became synonymous with mass culture, even though indigenous forms of mass culture were indeed developing in Britain and Europe quite independently of any American influences.\(^\text{157}\) Weiner points to the close parallels between Britain and America during this period; both were evolving democratic systems of government, both were experiencing industrial and political tensions, population levels were increasing dramatically in each country, so too were literacy levels and living standards. Out of these changing conditions, new forms of ‘mass culture’ began to emerge in both places which gave consumers new levels of choice, not least in the way they could select papers from a rapidly expanding range of titles.\(^\text{158}\) Whilst the parallels between the two countries were certainly close, levels of social democracy and social mobility were more advanced in America than in Britain, and American forms of mass culture were therefore regarded as forerunners of things to come. In this sense, American mass culture was bound to draw the Victorian gaze.

For most of the cultural gatekeepers of Victorian society, this coming American trend was viewed with alarm. Already anxious about the political and cultural implications of an indigenous democratic mass culture growing up around them, they saw what they regarded as the gross materialism and advanced democratic egalitarianism of American society as an ominous portent. For Matthew Arnold, the American newspaper encapsulated this threat in its most virulent form: “If one were searching for the best means to efface and kill in a whole nation the discipline of


respect, the feelings for what is elevated," he wrote in 1888, "one could not do better than take the American newspapers."

It is in this period therefore that we see a classic critique of Americanization beginning to form.

Americanization soon became synonymous with gross material quantity rather than cultural quality; its commercially-driven methods of production were considered mechanistic and standardised; it was generally seen as playing to a lowest common denominator in terms of cultural taste, and its demotic power threatened to undermine the cultural hierarchies that had traditionally held sway in Britain and Europe. It was feared that press standards would fall as mass circulation papers became increasingly powerful; there would be a loss of intellectual solidity, a frantic pursuit of novelty and sensation, and the mental faculties of readers would be "endangered by exposure to snippets of information".

Indeed ‘snippet journalism’ offered a perfect example of this new mechanised culture. When critics talked about the standardisation of American culture, they often referred to its ‘modularity’ in which ‘cultural products like wild west shows or circuses could be assembled, disassembled, and reassembled in seemingly infinite varieties’. If this could be achieved in the mounting of ambitious public spectacles, it could certainly be done with consummate ease in the constant circulation of journalistic snippets; they could be cut and pasted from one context to another, re-contextualised, re-purposed and consumed in easily digested units.

It is hardly surprising that literary critics took a dim view of this ‘scissors-and-paste’ culture. In doing so, they sought to establish a distinction between imitative ‘compilers’ (or, worse still, ‘plagiarists’) and original ‘authors’ who were worthy of critical attention. The line between the two became increasingly blurred during the rapid expansion of British print culture in the second half of the century. As early as 1844, a critic for The Morning Post bemoaned the claim

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that a scissors and paste writer was now considered “as much an author, in the vulgar acceptance of the term, as the man who writes a romance, a drama, or an essay from the stores of his imagination, observation, and reading.” The ‘authors’ of scissors-and-paste texts were marked out as lacking creativity, originality, imagination and taste. The transfer of print from one page to another was seen as mechanical rather than creative, having more in common with typesetting than writing. Whilst some critics were willing to admit that a well assembled collection of extracts could prove instructive or entertaining, scissors-and-paste journalism was nonetheless seen as a culturally debased product. As one commentator put it, “it is easier to write with a pair of shears than with a pen.”

As well as being easy to fabricate, snippet literature debased the reader. A range of cultural commentators saw the rise of the snippet as robbing the reading public of its ability to focus on longer texts. The Saturday Review, for example, condemned snippet papers as ‘abuses of the printing press’:

Cheaply illustrated and still more cheaply edited, with scissors and paste instead of independent thought, they are aiding in the mental deterioration of hundreds and thousands of young minds. They weaken the power of the brain in assimilating information, they reduce to a minimum its capacity for retaining and connecting ideas... [It is] encouraging a vast population of readers to grow up with brain which become fatigued, and hopelessly inattentive, if a mental effort is demanded for more than eighty seconds.

Again, the author sought to establish a clear cultural distinction between low-brow, half-literate readers of the snippet press and higher-brow readers who honed their critical faculties by consuming weightier material. “Our readers”, it confidently concluded, “belong to the dwindling minority which does not find its intellectual pastime in these compendiums of scissor-cuttings.”

162 The Morning Post, 3 May 1844: 3.
164 Nicholas Carr, The Shallows: What the Internet in Doing to our Brains, (New York, 2010). The Musical Times, 1 November 1900: 719. For a rebuttal, see: The Academy, 10 March 1900: 207.
166 The Saturday Review, 15 April 1899: 456.
This was the dominant voice of cultural pessimism, but countervailing voices could be heard too. The extreme plasticity of snippet journalism facilitated new and essentially modern forms of creativity. Rydell and Kroes remind us that American mass culture came to Britain and Europe in “disentangled bits and pieces, for others to recognise and pick up, and to re-arrange into a setting expressive of their own individual identities... In the process they... re-contextualised and re-semanticized American culture to make it function within expressive settings of their own making.”\(^{167}\) In effect, this process of *bricolage* allowed consumers to appropriate and repackage texts and other cultural artefacts. The concept comes from contemporary cultural studies but offers a useful way to analyse the new conditions of newspaper production and consumption that emerged during the last half of the nineteenth century. The ‘exchange editor’ with his shears, scanned piles of newspapers and selected particular snippets which were then re-assembled into miscellany columns. This process of mediation took place several times, as snippets journeyed from one newspaper to another, and finally from the US to Britain. Throughout this process, the interactive, snippet format adopted by many newspapers encouraged readers to become active players too. Readers scanned newspapers and magazines and submitted snippets to other papers in order to win competitions or simply to see their names in print.

Cultural debates over the perceived Americanization of the British press permeated all levels of British society during the late-Victorian period and continue to resonate to the present day. As John Street observes, the pattern was set: “radicals see popular culture as exploitative of the lower classes, conservatives see popular culture as debased and menacing, and liberals see all culture and all classes as equally valid and valuable.”\(^{168}\) Each of these interpretations was in circulation during the late Victorian period and have since inspired their own forms of historiography and literary criticism. Arnold’s exclusive definition of culture remained influential long into the twentieth century, acting as a keystone in the definition of Literary Studies and


\(^{168}\) John Street, *Politics and Popular Culture*, (Cambridge, 1997): 5-6
encouraging a long-term neglect of non-canonical texts, including the so-called ‘hack work’ of journalists.\textsuperscript{169} By the same token, Socialists, Marxists, and other members of the political left – Street’s ‘radicals’ – were equally dismissive of these commercial forms of popular culture; William Morris and other late-nineteenth century Socialists worshiped the organic qualities of a pre-industrial popular culture but were dismissive of the new urban mass culture, and the work of the Frankfurt School carried this perspective forward into the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{170} Alongside music halls and pubs, popular journalism has often been seen by the intellectual Left as manipulative of the masses, fostering what Gareth Stedman Jones terms “a culture of consolation” in which cheap entertainment blunts working-class radicalism.\textsuperscript{171} The Populist tradition of cultural theory – Street’s ‘liberals’ – were also in evidence during this period – W.T. Stead is perhaps their best-known voice – who argued that consumers of popular culture exercise more power than the pessimist readings of both the left and right of politics suggest. In part, they exercise this power through the basic process of either buying or not buying a commodity.\textsuperscript{172} But beyond this, they also invest these chosen commodities with their own meanings, sometimes subversively, but more often just playfully.

The evidence gathered in this project would support this third populist or liberal reading. During the late nineteenth century, the mass readership that emerged had a wide range of print culture from which to choose and exercised significant consumer power. Papers competed fiercely to gain and hold readers, and many failed if they were unable to tap into popular consumer demand. Whilst we can see the growth of ever more powerful press syndicates during the period, the age of the press barons and press monopolies was some way off. It was a buyer’s market, and increasing numbers of readers opted for a lighter form of journalism, often in the

\textsuperscript{169} This elitist approach to culture has thankfully broken down in recent years.
\textsuperscript{170} William Morris, \textit{News from Nowhere}, (Kelmscott Press, 1890).
\textsuperscript{172} Martin Conboy, \textit{The Press and Popular Culture}: 23-43.
form of the snippet. As the two last chapters of this thesis argue, snippet journalism played a central role in delivering America to British readers. It did this, partly through its growing popularity and partly because it adopted a form of writing that was accessible and easily digestible. Rydell and Kroes cite the example of Stravinsky making eclectic use of American music in several of his compositions and wonder if his weaving of American material into European cultural forms should be seen as a form of Americanization. Quite rightly, they reject such a reading. A critical use and mediation of American culture, they argue, “logically precludes labelling it a case of Americanization,” and this study of the critical and often creative mediation of American press material by British editors and readers offers a similar interpretative reading.\footnote{Robert Rydell and Rob Kroes, \textit{Buffalo Bill in Bologna}: 166.}
Chapter Two
The American Future

In September 1878, William Ewart Gladstone made a prediction. “The England and America of the present”, he argued, “are probably the two strongest nations of the world. But there can hardly be a doubt as between the America and the England of the future, that the daughter... will [soon become] unquestionably... stronger than the mother.”¹ The United States, he warned, was “passing [Britain] by in a canter” and would soon usurp its position on the world stage.² It was essential, he concluded, that his countrymen recognise the inevitability of this impending transition and begin to address what he later termed the “paramount question of the American future.”³ The publication of this prophecy is important, for it marks the onset of a transitional period in Anglo-American relations. Over the next two decades, the idea of America in British culture underwent a profound transformation – one which altered the transatlantic balance of power and had significant ramifications for the reformation of British national identity. At the heart of this process was a paradigm shift in Victorian conceptions of what this chapter terms the ‘American future’. At the start of the period, the response of Victorian journalists to Gladstone’s warning was almost universally hostile. The Times concluded that his reasoning was “at once redundant and defective” and was intended only to massage the ego of its American audience. The Morning Post accused Gladstone of seeking some form of revenge against the country that

² W. E. Gladstone, “Kin Beyond the Sea”: 181.
had rejected his party at the ballot box. Provincial papers, such as the Blackburn Standard, roundly condemned the ex-premier’s “unpatriotic”, “wild”, and “sinister” prophesies. Even the Liberal-leaning Daily News accused Gladstone of having “gone too far” with his “rash”, “sensational”, and “astounding” depiction of America’s “unrivalled future.”

It is possible to detect an undercurrent of anxiety running beneath these protestations of national confidence. Whilst The Graphic was quick to reassure its readers that “the facts [do not] justify Mr. Gladstone in his prophecies”, its defence of Britain’s international pre-eminence was less convincing. “The Americans have far more land than we”, it began:

but their intellectual, moral, and physical forces can never be so well organised... Besides, England is the centre of an enormous Empire... Even if there were some doubt on the matter – which we do not admit that there is – it could hardly be wise for a statesman... to address such flattering words to the Americas.”

The necessity of affirming Britain’s superiority, rather than simply taking it as read, is of course the most telling feature of this collective response. The fact that the press responded to Gladstone’s comments in such a defensive manner suggests that the threat posed by American competition was felt more seriously than journalists were willing to admit. However, whether they were fuelled by bravado or genuine confidence, the fact that most papers refused to entertain the possibility of Gladstone’s hypothesis is significant. It suggests that the idea of an inevitable ‘American future’ in which Britain would play a subordinate role to America was, at this point, regarded as culturally unspeakable. Indeed, the idea was so toxic that Gladstone’s allies in the Liberal party – men who were aware of America’s rapid economic progress – immediately distanced themselves from their former leader and publicly countered his prophesy with optimistic predictions about Britain’s enduring prosperity.

4 The Morning Post, 19 September 1878: 4.  
5 The Blackburn Standard, 21 September 1878: 5.  
6 Daily News, 18 September 1878: 4-5.  
7 The Graphic, 21 September 1878: 4.  
8 See, for example, a speech made by Anthony John Mundella reported in The Sheffield and Rotherham Independent, 23 November 1878: 11.
Twenty years later, when the country mourned Gladstone’s death, this cultural landscape had changed. Whilst some British observers continued to deny, or at least resist, the United States’ growing influence, the balance of public opinion had tipped decisively. The concept of an inevitable American future was now in widespread circulation. By the end of the Victorian period, it was commonplace for commentators such as F. A. McKenzie to claim that an ‘invasion’ of American products and inventions had swept the country, for the *Daily News* to joke that British children should be taught American English (‘the language of the future’), or for W. T. Stead to describe the *Americanisation of the World* as the “trend of the twentieth century.”

No longer regarded as an unstable political experiment, or dismissed as an underdeveloped post-colonial backwater, the United States was increasingly portrayed as a land of economic and technological ‘progress’, an influential player on the international stage, and the home of a distinctive brand of social, cultural, and spatial modernity.

This chapter explores the role played by newspapers and periodicals in shaping this transformation. Part one explores the emergence of the ‘inevitable American future’ in British discourse. It highlights the United States’ growing industrial and financial power as the driving force behind this change, but also demonstrates how the concept transcended economics. It analyses news reports of transatlantic economic competition and explores the way in which they combined with daily financial bulletins and newspaper advertisements to communicate a pervasive sense of America’s new commercial power. Part two analyses press coverage of the modern American city – the key space in which the United States’ emerging identity was expressed and decoded. In particular, it draws upon representations of skyscrapers and the Brooklyn Bridge in order to examine how the British press both communicated and interpreted modern America’s distinctive sense of scale. These two sections are linked by a case study of press responses to the Statue of Liberty – a monument which British journalists interpreted as a

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symbol of America’s growing confidence, as well as a defining example of what they termed the country’s insatiable appetite for ‘bigness’.

The arguments developed in this chapter engage with two recurring concepts: modernity and identity. Modernity, currently occupies a prominent position within academic debate. It is, however, an ambiguous and often contentious term – one which has been defined and applied in different ways by a range of historians, literary critics, sociologists, linguists and cultural theorists. It is important, therefore, to establish how the concept will be applied in this study. In its broadest sense, modernity is a periodizing concept that has been used to describe the emergence of post-medieval societies and the rise of phenomena such as industrial capitalism, urbanisation, secularization, rationalism, democracy, mass culture, consumerism, scientism, technological innovation, and state power. Whilst historians broadly accept that these developments have taken place over the last 300 years across a wide spectrum of the globe, particularly in what is broadly described as ‘The West’, it has become increasing difficult to map a universal timeline onto modernity’s emergence. Currently, the prevailing trend is to argue that

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10 The term ‘bigness’ was frequently used by British journalists when referring to America. It may have been chosen in order to imbue the country’s love of large things with a sense of undignified Yankee brashness. ‘Bigness’, according to several reports, was not synonymous with ‘greatness’. For examples, see: The Bradford Observer, 14 May 1870: 3; The Standard, July 10 1872: 5; Trewman’s Exeter Flying Post, 13 December 1876: 5; Daily News, 5 January 1884: 6; The Ipswich Journal, 19 December 1885: 7; The Sheffield & Rotherham Independent, 2 May 1889: 5; The Yorkshire Herald, 20 July 1893: 2; Huddersfield Daily Chronicle, 17 September 1894: 4; Berrow’s Worcester Journal, 5 December 1896: 10; Glasgow Herald, 24 June 1897: 4.


the rise of modernity was a gradual, unsystematic, and multidimensional process which took place in different ways, and at different times, around the world. The broad, theoretical studies of ‘modernity’ and ‘postmodernity’, which characterised the field in the 1990s, have now given way to a new wave of scholarship centred on localized ‘sites of modernity’ – specific moments, places, people, ideas and institutions in which varying forms of modernity were expressed, debated, embraced, or resisted.  

This study subscribes to a similar concept of multiple, co-existing, overlapping, and competing modernities, and seeks to apply them to a late nineteenth-century, transatlantic context. It argues that a uniquely American form of modernity emerged during this period – one that shared many characteristics with European modernities, but also brought something distinctive to the process. It does not seek to examine all aspects of American modernity; American intellectual and political discourse, the country’s gender politics, and, in particular, the United States’ relationship with technology are all deserving of academic attention but cannot be explored here. Instead, it focuses on two elements of the country’s emerging identity which preoccupied Victorian observers and were considered by them to be uniquely American: the power of the ‘almighty dollar’ and what cultural historian, Michael Tavel Clarke, describes as America’s pervasive ‘culture of size’. It seeks to explore how these two aspects of American modernity were circulated, consumed, and interpreted in Victorian Britain. In this respect, it builds upon methodologies developed in the field of transnational history which have eschewed traditional models of national history and national comparison, highlighting instead the importance of ‘cultural transfer’ and ‘entangled histories’. Whilst it emphasizes the importance of Anglo-American interactions, this chapter does not argue for the existence of a single

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14 Transatlantic modernities have been explored for an earlier period by researches in the field of Atlantic history. See, for example: Alejandro Mejías-López, Inverted Conquest: the myth of modernity and the transatlantic onset of modernism, (Nashville, 2009).
15 Michael Tavel Clarke, These Days of Large Things: the culture of size in modern America, 1865-1930. (Michigan, 2007).
‘transatlantic modernity’; despite Britain and America’s extensive cultural ties, modernity was encountered and interpreted differently on both sides of the Atlantic. Rather, the purpose of the chapter is to explore how one site of modernity (late-Victorian Britain) was influenced and shaped through dialogues and encounters with another (progressive era America) in the context of the British press.

Shalini Randeria argues that “modernity as a social experience varies in the understandings and practices of different groups and people”, and these groups can be subdivided by a range of social and geographic categories. New York, for example, was home to a subtly different form of modernity than Chicago, whilst the forces of modernity were experienced and conceptualised in different ways by London stock jobbers, middle-class suburban housewives, and provincial farm labourers. Whilst such variations are important to recognise, there is a danger that a relentless pursuit of specifics loses sight of the most significant general trends. This chapter discusses modernity from a predominantly national perspective because Britain’s encounter with American modernity was largely negotiated in national terms. This approach is consistent with a dominant Victorian press discourse, which decoded Anglo-American modernities primarily within a framework of national rather than local difference. When Victorian observers were compelled to make sense of modern America, they instinctively sought to define it against ideas of Britishness. This was a relational process – one in which ideas about Britishness were constantly reinforced or changed by comparisons with the American ‘Other’.

Anthropological, literary and historical research into the formation of national identities has argued, in the words of Linda Colley, that nations “define themselves... not just through an internal or domestic dialogue but in conscious opposition to the Other beyond their shores.” In

her influential monograph, *Britons*, she argues that a British national identity was ‘forged’ during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries by establishing religious, political and cultural distinctions with Continental Europe and by waging wars with France. Whilst Colley’s study ends with the coronation of Victoria, British national identity continued to be reshaped during the nineteenth century through a series of fresh encounters. Continental Europe, India, Asia, Africa, and Ireland all had parts to play in the process. However, as this chapter demonstrates, the emergence of modern America introduces a key player onto the international stage and creates a new, and potent ‘Other’ against which British national identities were increasingly negotiated and reformed. At once both foreign and familiar, by the end of the nineteenth century, America had secured a powerful hold over Britain’s sense of self.

In his celebrated study of *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson argues that communities which are not based on everyday face-to-face interactions are created and sustained in the collective imagination of their inhabitants. “[The] members of even the smallest nation”, he argues, “will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.”18 As Carolyn Steedman argues, Anderson’s thesis emphasises a “psychological model... of incorporation, appropriation, interiority and sameness in the making of national identities.”19 In other words, as well as being forged through encounters with external Others, national identities also coalesce around perceived points of internal commonality – a series of shared experiences, values and practices which allow socially, culturally, and geographically separated individuals to perceive themselves as sharing a ‘deep horizontal comradeship’.20

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19 Carolyn Steedman, “Inside, outside, Other”: 61.
During the second half of the nineteenth century, the press was a key player in negotiating both internal and external forms of identity formation. Firstly, as Anderson argues, the emergence of print capitalism and the growth of the mass media played an important role in creating and sustaining imagined national communities. He describes the consumption of newspapers as a ‘mass ceremony’ – a daily act which took place almost simultaneously across the nation. Whilst the act of reading was “performed in silent privacy”, each reader was:

well aware that the ceremony he performs is being replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others of whose existence he is confident, yet of whose identity he has not the slightest notion... At the same time, the newspaper reader, observing exact replicas of his own paper being consumed by his subway, barbershop, or residential neighbours, is continually reassured that the imagined world is visibly rooted in everyday life.²¹

As these internal commonalities were being reinforced, newspapers were also circulating representations of the ‘Other’. As the next sections of this chapter show, representations of the ‘American Other’ circulated within a variety of journalistic genres, including Reuter’s financial bulletins, columns of foreign intelligence, reports from foreign correspondents, travelogues, and clippings from the international press. Whilst Victorian encounters with the ‘American Other’ took place across a range of social, cultural, economic and political contexts, this chapter seeks to demonstrate that the reach of the press and its ability to constantly circulate images of American modernity made it the key player in the negotiation of transatlantic identities.

**American Competition**

On October 28 1886, journalists from around the world gathered to report on the unveiling of the Statue of Liberty. Within hours of the dedication ceremony, hurriedly written accounts of the

celebrations had been telegraphed to newspaper offices throughout the world. The next morning, news of the statue’s unveiling circulated extensively on both sides of the Atlantic. The American coverage was characterised by a mood of patriotic, and sometimes bombastic, idealism. Bold headlines such as “THE LIGHT OF LIBERTY”, “LIBERTY’S MIGHTY SHRINE”, “FREEDOM’S SACRED STATUE”, and “A MONUMENT TO PEACE” were emblazoned across the front pages of popular papers. Drawing upon sentiments expressed by speakers at the dedication ceremony, these articles focused on three main themes. Some spoke warmly about the bond of friendship which existed between France and America. Others looked back proudly over the first century of the Republic and celebrated the progress made since America had won its freedom. Finally, many were inspired by the occasion itself and confidently proclaimed the everlasting triumph of liberty, world peace, and enlightenment. Underpinning these idealistic and convivial responses was a more important, and to some observers a more disquieting, message about America’s place in the world. “It is one of those [events]”, proclaimed Albert Lefaivre, the French minister to the United States, “which form an epoch in history”. The United States, he predicted, was destined to “illuminate the whole world” with the light of Liberty’s torch. A fellow Frenchman, Count Ferdinand de Lesseps, agreed: it was symbolic, he said, of America’s “great future”; a testament to the country’s ‘invincible intrepidity’ and the liberating power of its “go ahead” attitude. Similar predictions about America’s future characterised the speeches of other dignitaries and even informed the message of the ceremony’s opening prayer. In response to these glowing

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22 In a rush to meet deadlines, some foreign correspondents filed their story before the event had even concluded. The Daily News’ New York correspondent, for example, remarked that “the display of fireworks in the evening was most elaborate, attracting crowds of people”. In reality, the fireworks were cancelled due to the poor weather.
23 Boston Daily Advertiser, 29 October 1886: 1; The Galveston Daily News, 29 October 1886: 1; The Daily Inter Ocean, 29 October 1886: 2; Morning Oregonian, 30 October 1886: 2.
24 A record of the speeches made during the ceremony were published by the American Committee as a souvenir of the day: Inauguration of the Statue of Liberty Enlightening The World by the President of the United States on Bedlow’s Island, New York, Thursday, October 28, 1886, (New York, 1887).
25 A useful summary of American press responses was published in The Daily Inter Ocean (Chicago), 30 October 1886:12.
26 Inauguration of the Statue of Liberty: 33
27 Inauguration of the Statue of Liberty: 36
forecasts, the President was moved to assure the French delegation that the United States would use its burgeoning power for good; that the country would stand as a beacon of liberty, peace, and enlightenment and would strive only to “pierce the darkness of ignorance and man’s oppression.”

The British press was less than convinced. Indifferent to grand pronouncements on the triumph of Liberty, and understandably cautious of America’s self-ordained mission to “enlighten the world”, most journalists responded to the unveiling of the statue with a more jaundiced eye. Rather than read it as celebration of freedom or as a memorial to past triumphs, they interpreted the monument as a statement of intent – a personification, not of liberty, but of progress and power. To Victorian observers, the statue represented the United States’ growing confidence and its rapid emergence as an economic, political, and cultural powerhouse. This colossal American monument began to tower over the Atlantic at a time when the prospect of an ‘inevitable American future’ was beginning to loom large in the Victorian imagination. Following two decades of post-war reconstruction, America had emerged on the world stage as an increasingly confident, rapidly industrialising nation with its own maturing social, cultural, and political systems. Whilst Gladstone’s prediction had been dismissed as scare-mongering in 1878, less than a decade later his forecast no longer seemed quite so fanciful. The United States’ rapid development and potential for further expansion now led many Victorians to feel that it was capable of challenging Britain’s position on the world stage.

It is possible to track the emergence of this concept of an ‘inevitable American future’ not simply in its growing stature as a new economic and political force on the international stage – (its imperial intervention in Cuba represents a watershed moment in this respect) - but also, and perhaps most significantly, in the way it began permeating and reshaping everyday British

29 Inauguration of the Statue of Liberty: 32.
The importation and consumption of American foodstuffs and consumer goods; the invention and adoption of new products and technologies such as Edison’s phonograph and incandescent lamp; sporting victories by American yachtsmen, boxers, jockeys, and athletes; the growing presence of American popular culture in the country’s bookshops, theatres, and music halls; high-profile marriages between rich American heiresses and bankrupt British aristocrats all helped to signal the country’s growing vitality during the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

However, arguably the most prominent strand of this discourse centred on America’s perceived challenge to British commerce and industry, and the growing awareness of this challenge not only changed popular perceptions of America but the ways in which Britain was obliged to think of itself. In keeping with many commentators, Gladstone turned to the imagery of kin relations to capture this impending transformation. He talked of the American daughter inevitably outgrowing the British mother, whilst British newspapers began to replace the slightly patronising image of ‘Cousin Jonathon’, however enterprising he might sometimes be, with the slicker, more streetwise and slightly more sinister ‘Uncle Sam’. There was an implicit understanding in all these images that the two countries were part of a shared family, but for all its reassuring qualities,


everyone knew that the family was bound to change. Sooner or later, there would be a profound
and inexorable shift in power relations.

Imagery is one thing, facts are another: America’s challenge to Britain’s economic position
was real and open to measurement. In the half century following the Civil War, the United States:

overtook Britain in terms of per capita income and industrial output, becoming the
world’s leading manufacturing economy. The nature of U.S. exports shifted from
predominantly agricultural to mainly manufacturing, and these exports played a dominant
role in forcing changes in the economies in Europe and other nations. 33

By the 1890s, America had surpassed Britain in terms of manufacturing output and cornered
many of its markets both at home and abroad. 34 The Victorian public experienced this transition
of economic power in a number of ways. Those working in industries that struggled to compete
with America, such as livestock farming, hardware manufacturing and ironmaking, were naturally
most sensitive to the country’s growing power. In 1870, for example, Middlesbrough was widely
referred to as ‘Ironopolis’, the iron-making centre of the world, but its position in the modern
capitalist marketplace was never secure. By the mid-1870s, one of the main industrial leaders of
the town, Isaac Lowthian Bell, was sufficiently aware of the competitive threat posed by America
to organise an extensive tour of its mines and ironworks. 35 He published two accounts of what he
found, and whilst he tried to maintain a cautious air of optimism about Britain’s ability to face this
new threat, was deeply impressed with American technology and management. 36

33 Stanley L. Engerman & Kenneth L. Sokoloff, “Technology and Industrialization, 1790-1914”, in Stanley L.
34 For the history of Anglo-American economic competition, see: Michael Dintenfass, The Decline of
Industrial Britain, 1870-1980, (London, 1992); Nicholas Crafts, “Long-run growth”, in Roderick Flour and
Paul Johnson (eds.), The Cambridge Economic History of Modern Britain Vol 2: Economic Maturity, 1860-
1939, (Cambridge, 2004): 1-24; W. D. Rubinstein, Capitalism, Culture, and Decline in Britain, 1750-1990,
36 Isaac Lowthian Bell, Notes on a Visit to Coal and Iron Mines and Ironworks in the United States
(Newcastle, 1875); Issac Lowthian Bell, Report on the iron manufacture of the United States of America, and
a comparison with Great Britain (1877).
Experience of this economic competition was not limited to industrialists and their workforce. Even the most casual readers of the late-Victorian press, could hardly ignore the growing economic threat from America. Articles mentioning the topic of ‘American competition’ began to appear as early as the 1820s, but the term became particularly prevalent during the late 1870s.\textsuperscript{37} Using digital archives, it is possible to obtain rough quantitative data about this increasing sense of threat. A sample of 29 nineteenth-century newspapers were searched for any article in which the words ‘America’, ‘American’, or ‘United States’ appeared within 10 words of the word ‘competition’.\textsuperscript{38} It is not possible to automatically filter the underlying message of these articles – to separate, for example, alarmist comments about American competition from those which continued to proclaim Britain’s superiority. It is also likely that a significant number of articles that discussed the topic are not identified by these specific search terms.\textsuperscript{39} Some articles discussing the meat industry, for example, referred to competition with ‘Chicago’ rather than ‘America’.\textsuperscript{40} However, whilst this data has its weaknesses, it does provide a telling overview of changing trends over time.\textsuperscript{41}

Fig 2.1 shows the results broken down by decade with the addition of data relating to Germany and France.\textsuperscript{42} It is immediately clear that the idea of ‘American competition’ circulated far more extensively in the press during the final three decades of the century than it had done during the 1850s and 1860s. Until the 1870s, references to French competition appeared more

\textsuperscript{37} For some early examples, see: The Times, 12 April 1821: 3; The Morning Chronicle, 22 March 1824: 2; The Morning Chronicle, 25 April 1832: 4; The Times, 25 May 1840: 6.
\textsuperscript{38} Search phrase: “America n10 Competition” OR “American n10 Competition” OR “United States n10 Competition”. Sports reports and adverts were omitted from the search.
\textsuperscript{39} Words such as ‘challenge’ and ‘threat’ were occasionally used in place of ‘competition’, but produced too many irrelevant hits to be included in the search.
\textsuperscript{40} Searches for the phrase ‘competition’ within 10 words of key American cities and states produced a small number of results, but the value of this data is outweighed by the complexity of ensuring that all possible locations are included in the search. A comprehensive search would need to include more than 50 additional geographical keywords. Moreover, these articles were more likely to refer to domestic American competition between regions and cities rather than international competition with Britain.
\textsuperscript{41} A detailed assessment of the strengths and weakness of these digital methodologies appears in the introduction to the thesis.
\textsuperscript{42} French and German data was generated using an identical methodology. Searches were performed for: “German n10 Competition” OR “Germany n10 Competition”; and “French n10 competition” OR “France n10 competition”.

frequently than those on America. After 1875, the United States dramatically outstripped both its European competitors. By the 1890s, articles mentioning America and the word ‘competition’ in close proximity were on average more than three times as common as they were in the period before the Civil War. Fig 2.2 breaks the results down by year and highlights the period between 1876 and 1882 as a time in which the idea of American competition seemed to loom particularly large. There are sound reasons for this. The late 1870s witnessed dramatic changes in the economic fortunes of Britain: a period of expansion in the early part of the decade was followed by a severe downturn as the financial ‘Panic of 1873’ triggered the onset of what was then referred to as ‘The Great Depression’. Economic historians may have discounted the idea of the ‘Great Depression’ as largely mythical, but the fact remains that popular perceptions of Britain’s economic power underwent a significant change in the mid-to-late 1870s and this growing emphasis on American competition is one key manifestation of the country’s changing mood.

Upon closer inspection, it appears that British anxieties had a distinct seasonal pattern. As Fig 2.3 shows, interest in the idea of American competition began to escalate during the autumn and winter of 1878, and then peaked during the autumn and winters of 1879, 1880, and 1881. The most likely explanation for this seasonal pattern is that the effects of American agricultural competition were felt more acutely in the autumn months after crops had been harvested. By 1882, this intense interest in American competition had dissipated but still remained significantly higher than pre-1878 levels, and was probably now regarded as an established fact of life and therefore not as newsworthy. It was not until 1896 that references to German competition significantly exceeded those about America, and this spike was short-lived.

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43 Historians now prefer the term ‘Long Depression’ in order to differentiate this period from the Great Depression of the 1930s.
Fig 2.1. Articles in which America, Germany and France are mentioned within 10 words of 'competition'. Results displayed by decade.

Fig 2.2. Articles in which America, Germany and France are mentioned within 10 words of 'competition'. Results displayed by year.
The fact that references to German and French competition did not increase significantly between 1879 and 1882 indicates that the dramatic growth in attention paid to American competition might be explained by structural changes in the American, as well as British, economy. Economic historians have argued that these years did witness a brief resurgence in the U.S. following the worldwide depression of 1873. The American National Bureau of Economic Research has identified March 1879 as the point at which the country’s economy ceased to contract, and this date maps remarkably well onto the graphs presented in figs 2.2 and 2.3.\textsuperscript{45} Whether the average Victorian newspaper reader was aware of this fact is very doubtful, but it seems likely that the growth enjoyed by some American industries at a time when the British

The economy remained in the grip of depression served to stimulate concerns about American competition.

What is much more apparent is that these concerns were fuelled, at least in part, by the press itself. Reports about American competition generated debate and attracted comment from politicians and industrialists, whose reactions inspired further press coverage. Newspapers did not create this discourse out of thin air – articles on American competition were written in response to parliamentary debates, political speeches, lectures, and reports, pieces of foreign intelligence, trade meetings, and correspondence from readers, and were also informed by broader economic trends and developments. However, the press played a critical role in establishing the topic of American competition on the national agenda, bringing these debates into the public eye. The debates were cyclical in nature. Once a particular panic had played out, the subject lay dormant for several months, only to be resurrected at the next moment of crisis. As the Aberdeen Weekly Journal noted in January 1879:

Now and then... we hear the cry of alarm raised that John Bull’s supremacy in the manufacturing world is in danger of being trampled underfoot by his enterprising Cousin Jonathan; and with virtuous indignation some instance is pointed out in which American goods are sold to British markets cheaper than similar goods manufactured in our own country. But the note of alarm [soon] dies away...

By 1879, as the Aberdeen Weekly Journal noted, the intervals between these moments of alarm were getting shorter. During the 1880s and 1890s, the competitive presence of American industry was never far from Victorian Britain’s national consciousness.

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46 For parliamentary debates, political speeches, lectures and reports, see: Essex Standard, 29 March 1879: 8; Bristol Mercury, 17 August 1878: 3; Liverpool Mercury, 22 November 1878: 7; Sheffield & Rotherham Independent, 23 November 1878: 11; Blackburn Standard, 30 November 1878: 6; Northern Echo, 25 February 1879: 3; Western Mail, 22 September 1879: 2. For foreign intelligence, see: Birmingham Daily Post, 13 March 1878: 5; Northern Echo, 14 June 1879: 3. For trade meetings, see: Isle of Man Times, 15 March 1879: 2; Cheshire Observer, 5 April 1879: 5; Daily Gazette (Middlesbrough), 12 June 1879: 3. For readers’ correspondence, see: Preston Chronicle, 18 May 1878: 6; Birmingham Daily Post, 9 January 1879: 6; Glasgow Herald, 17 February 1879: 5; Morning Post, 18 August 1879: 2; Derby Mercury, 1 October 1879: 8.

The form taken by articles discussing American competition varied throughout the period. Many addressed the topic directly, often under titles such as ‘American Competition’, ‘The Future Competition of America’, or ‘American Competition in Neutral Markets’. Some opted for more provocative headlines such as ‘American Versus British Manufacturers’ or, in the case of the Belfast News-Letter, ‘Is England Decaying?’ Others reported the comments of M.P.s, and industrialists who felt they had something to say on the matter. Most, however, focused on America’s challenge to a specific industry. In the provincial press, articles typically dealt with the prospect of American competition in local trades. Middlesbrough’s North-Eastern Daily Gazette, for example, carried articles discussing American competition in the iron and steel industry; Birmingham-based papers focused on the threat posed by U.S. hardware manufacturing, and Cardiff’s Western Mail was understandably concerned about the United States’ position in the tinplate trade.

The tone of these articles varied between defiance and despair. As early as June 1878, the Birmingham Daily Post compared America to Alexander the Great. Uncle Sam, they observed, “having long since covered [himself] with fame and not a little profit in the region of manufacturing”, was “ever sighing... for new worlds to conquer.” Most press commentary in the pre-1880 period however was not so defeatist. The Aberdeen Weekly Journal, for example, observed that periodic alarms about American competition were often explained away with

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48 Reynolds’s Newspaper, 8 May 1881: 5; Berrow’s Worcester Journal, 11 October 1879: 7; The Sheffield & Rotherham Independent, 3 March 1886: 3
52 Birmingham Daily Post, 4 June 1878: 3.
“assurances that the state of matters [was] quite exceptional and temporary, and that there [was] no danger of permanent competition.” Similarly, a Daily Gazette editorial from December 1877 remarked that those who hinted at the long-term impact of American competition were “at once dubbed a pessimist.”\(^5^3\) The hostile reaction to Gladstone’s predictions certainly bears this out. Following his defeat at the 1874 election and subsequent resignation from the leadership of the Liberal party, the former Prime Minister felt able to speak on the topic with more freedom. Other politicians were not so candid. Shortly after Gladstone’s article was published, Anthony John Mundella, a hosiery manufacturer and prominent Liberal M.P., spoke at the annual dinner of the Sheffield Trades Council.\(^5^4\) To great applause, he proclaimed that “England possessed all the elements necessary to maintain her manufacturing superiority”, and announced that he:

> did not believe in [Gladstone’s] theory for one moment. He had no fear of the decadence of England so long as England was true to herself. (Hear.) America was a country of such vast resources that it did not do to speak of her lightly... But it did not follow that the growth of America should be England’s decadence. (Hear.) His belief was England would grow...\(^5^5\)

However, following these patriotic remarks, which were printed two days later in the local paper, he modified the tone of his message and warned his audience against complacency. “Whatever might be our confidence in our position,” he cautioned, “we must at the same time be watchful.”\(^5^6\) Mundella’s anxieties are muted but clear. In reality, he was a loyal supporter of Gladstone and acutely aware of the threat posed by America, and yet the political climate of 1878 made it almost impossible for him to speak openly on the subject without being thought unpatriotic or alarmist.\(^5^7\)

It is tempting to criticise these confident dismissals of America’s growing economic power as the words of a country collectively burying its head in the sand. However, it is important to

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\(^5^3\) The Daily Gazette, 29 December 1877: 2.
\(^5^5\) The Sheffield and Rotherham Independent, 23 November 1878: 11.
\(^5^6\) The Sheffield and Rotherham Independent, 23 November 1878: 11.
\(^5^7\) Jonathan Spain, “Mundella, Anthony John (1825-1897)”. 
remember that this was a period of financial turmoil – a time when banks and business on both sides of the Atlantic were collapsing and countries teetered on the brink of economic disaster. The financial panic of 1873 and the Great Chicago Fire of 1871 had demonstrated that American institutions might be reduced to ashes at any moment.\(^{58}\) America was as vulnerable to the vagaries of modernity as any other country – perhaps more so. Britain, moreover, had successfully maintained its position as the world’s leading economic player for the best part of a century through fluctuating periods of buoyant economic expansion and frightening depression. For all his energy and resources, there remained a distinct possibility that ‘Uncle Sam’ might soon overstretch his reach, but by the time the Statue of Liberty was unveiled in 1886, the prospect of an American collapse seemed increasingly remote. The United States had consolidated its gains within existing markets and was expanding into new territories. Rather than discussing American competition as an emerging challenge, or dismissing it as a temporary inconvenience, many articles now treated it as a fact of life. Middlesbrough’s *North-Eastern Daily Gazette* no longer spoke of American competition in abstract terms, but carried reports on the wages paid to American steel workers, meetings between specific American manufacturers, and potential changes to American import tariffs.\(^{59}\) This coverage was not inherently fatalistic – the paper highlighted potential opportunities for British manufacturers as well as the emergence of new threats – but nevertheless it reflected the extent to which the local press, not just in Middlesbrough but in towns and cities across the country, had accepted the fact that events in America now played a central role in determining the economic future of local readers. Whilst the late-Victorian press continued to seek for any encouraging signs of America’s weakness, there were growing numbers who were coming to accept Gladstone’s once-controversial prediction as


self-evident. The idea of an ‘inevitable American future’, though by no means uncontested, was now in widespread circulation.

The emergence of this idea and, crucially, its sustained presence in late-Victorian culture and discourse was symptomatic of the way in which a news-hungry media and the international telegraph had reshaped the experience of crisis. The ever-present anxieties associated with the modern capitalist marketplace, aligned to the growing power of the press and its daily search for attention-grabbing headlines, tended to highlight problems and fears, and to keep the idea of rivals and competitors always in the public mind. Twenty first-century commentators often blame 24 hour TV news channels for creating a world which seems to be perpetually on the brink of disaster, but, as Agnés Gulyais observes, a similar process can be traced back to an earlier era.\(^6^0\) The rapid circulation of information around the globe fuelled a new journalistic culture centred on a “habitual expectation of (and desire for) the world in constant crisis.”\(^6^1\) Gone were the days when financial journalists were content to print ‘there is nothing to report.’

Crucially, the press also transformed local crises into a full-blown national experience. Whilst the threat posed by American competition to iron workers in Middlesbrough had little impact on the everyday lives of agricultural workers in Hampshire, the press conflated them and bound them together into an imagined community of crisis.\(^6^2\) A threat to one part of the country signalled a potential threat to others. Whilst this imagined community was usually conceptualised in national terms, the press’ appetite for stories of disaster sometimes encouraged its readers to feel part of a pan-European crisis triggered by the growing threat posed by the United States. In September 1884, for example, the North-Eastern Daily Gazette carried an article exploring how American competition was impacting upon Swiss watch manufacturers – a trade that the majority


\(^{61}\) Agnés Gulyais, “Global Journalism”: 253.

\(^{62}\) For the classic exploration of the role played by newspapers in creating imagined communities, see: Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*. 
of people in Middlesbrough had no personal interest in, but a news item about American power that resonated deeply with local readers and reinforced their sense of being part of a wider threatened community.\(^6\) From the late 1870s, regular press reports about how American competition was impacting on different areas and industries helped to sustain a sustained sense of crisis, even among groups who were otherwise unaffected.

Whilst articles devoted to the subject of American competition provide a useful way to measure changes in the British national psyche, they were not the only journalistic forms to highlight this growing economic challenge from America. During the final three decades of the nineteenth century, America secured an increasingly visible presence in the financial bulletins that came to form a staple fixture in most influential newspapers. Columns of commercial intelligence were a familiar feature of most daily and weekly newspapers throughout the century. Before the growth of a mass reading public, successful editors targeted their papers at the mercantile middle classes – political debate, court reports, international news, and various forms of up-to-date market information were the main ingredients of both the national and provincial press. In papers such as The Times, the Daily News, or the Leeds Mercury, columns appeared each day headed ‘Money Markets’, ‘City Intelligence’, or ‘London Stock Exchange’. Some offered descriptive accounts of matters affecting trade, whilst others contained tables of the latest stock and commodity prices gathered from Britain and abroad.

Following the ascendency of popular ‘New Journalism’ in the 1880s and 1890s, these specialist columns continued to hold their place. Indeed, many swelled in size in response to a globalising economy and the creation of an international telegraph network. A survey of the press on the 29 October 1886, for example, reveals that coverage of Liberty’s unveiling shared space in most papers with some form of financial news. Page four of The Times contained almost three

columns of news about stocks, shares, and produce markets.\textsuperscript{64} The \textit{Daily News} filled four columns of its second page with similar material.\textsuperscript{65} The \textit{Leeds Mercury}, among the most weighty of provincial papers, devoted one of its eight pages entirely to financial news and scattered other pieces of commercial intelligence throughout the paper.\textsuperscript{66} The \textit{North-Eastern Daily Gazette} devoted the best part of a column to the state of the London stock exchange and news of the day’s markets.\textsuperscript{67} Whilst the Sunday press concerned itself more with leisure and entertainment than business, most weekly papers still found room for financial reports. \textit{Lloyd’s Weekly News}, a radical paper aimed principally at a working-class readership, carried a column of the “Latest Market Intelligence” on its fourth page, whilst another popular radical paper, \textit{Reynolds’s Newspaper}, tucked a column of market news between gardening advice and “A French Romance”.\textsuperscript{68} The weekly \textit{Hampshire Telegraph} did not include a column of commercial intelligence in this period, but was the exception rather than the rule. Whether they studied them carefully or skipped ahead to find recipes and sports reports, late-Victorian readers encountered financial bulletins whenever they opened their newspapers.

During the final decades of the nineteenth century America secured an increasingly prominent position in these financial sections. Until the late 1870s, it occupied an intermittent and largely subordinate position. Updates from the New York stock exchange appeared but were often buried under columns of general financial news. Special reports dedicated to American markets appeared occasionally in newspapers such as the \textit{Daily News} but were not common. America was recognised as forming part of the global economy, but was not regarded as a major figure. Following the escalation of interest in American competition after 1878, however, separate reports dedicated to the United States became increasingly common. Arguably the most pervasive example of this new genre was Reuters’ ‘American Markets’ bulletin which began to

\textsuperscript{64} \textit{The Times}, 29 October 1886: 4.
\textsuperscript{65} \textit{Daily News}, 29 October 1886: 2.
\textsuperscript{66} \textit{Leeds Mercury}, 29 October 18886: 6.
\textsuperscript{67} \textit{The North-Eastern Daily Gazette}, 29 October 1886: 3.
appear in British newspapers in 1881. This service provided papers with the latest financial intelligence telegraphed directly from New York. Papers such as The Daily News, The Standard and the Liverpool Mercury subscribed immediately, and others like the Glasgow Herald, the Sheffield Independent, the Bristol Mercury, the Birmingham Daily Post, the Leeds Mercury, and the Morning Post soon followed. Reuters’ competitors, such as Central News and Exchange Telegraph (Extel), launched similar services. By the end of the decade, daily updates from New York had become a fixture of many of the country’s most widely circulating newspapers.

Reuters’ Bulletins typically began with a brief, cryptic paragraph capturing the tone of key markets: “Money, easy;... cotton, firm;... lard, firm and advancing; wheat, heavy;... coffee, steady; iron, dull and weak.” The bulk of each article was dominated by a table which listed share prices and the value of key commodities. On the morning of 28 October 1886, for example, readers were informed, among other things, that the price of ‘Central Pacific Railroad Shares’ had dipped from 46½ to 46 during the last 24 hours, that ‘cotton futures’ for January had been adjusted from 9.04 to 9.08, and that the price of crude petroleum had remained stable at 6⅛. As Fig 2.4 shows, this raw data was presented to readers with no supplementary explanation or analysis. Here was a feature which required expertise and specialist knowledge. At a time when most newspapers were being purged of anything that was not accessible and interesting to a mass audience, financial bulletins made no concessions to the layman.

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70 Daily News, 6 January 1881: 5.
71 Daily News, 28 October 1886: 3.
There are a number of reasons why editors swam against the popularising tide and maintained these features. Firstly, their presence helped elevate the prestige of a newspaper. For provincial newspapers in particular, the possession of the latest information from New York marked them out as substantial, with an international profile that could compete with major metropolitan dailies like *The Times*. Ever since the nationalisation of the telegraph in 1870, provincial papers had relished their ability to match London papers in the speed with which they could acquire national and international news. Whilst the collection of this kind of information had once required an expensive network of foreign correspondents, companies like Reuters allowed any newspapers willing to pay their subscription rates to carry daily updates. However, at a time when transatlantic telegraphy was still in its infancy, the ability of a provincial newspaper to publish American stock prices only a few hours after the New York exchange closed carried its own kind of cultural cachet. A certain amount of boastful posturing was at work when editors of small regional dailies appended the phrase ‘*By Special Telegram*’ or ‘*From Our Special Correspondent*’, knowing full well that the information had been sent to hundreds of newspapers around the world. This performance was, in itself, an important manifestation of modernity. It stemmed, at least in part, from a desire to be (or at least appear to be) connected to the pulse of global exchange. In a world where the value of information disintegrated by the minute, newspapers strove to be *first* with the *latest* news.

Here, again, was the quintessentially modern experience of change and crisis. Whilst the majority of commercial bulletins documented only subtle changes in the market, the period’s economic instability and the speed of international exchange meant that both disaster and success were likely to strike any moment. This mood of anxious anticipation was a key ingredient in fostering a daily appetite for news. Ripples caused by the discovery of silver in the Nevadan

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hills, a factory fire in Philadelphia, or the collapse of a bank in Boston had the potential to make waves in Britain within hours. Here were three core aspects of modernity operating in tandem: the shrinking of time and space, the disquieting/exhilarating sense of perpetual change, and the sense that Britain’s fortunes were inextricably linked to events taking place in other parts of the world, not least America. It was the late-Victorian press which made this experience of modernity part of everyday British life. It sustained the networks which allowed the New York stock exchange and the residents of a provincial market town in Britain to exist within the same financial world and, equally importantly, to experience it almost simultaneously. “To be modern”, argued Marshall Berman, “is to experience personal and social life as a maelstrom, to find one’s world and oneself in perpetual disintegration and renewal, trouble and anguish, ambiguity and contradiction: to be part of a universe in which all that is solid melts into air.” Engaging with America through daily financially bulletins was a way for Victorians to experience the new material possibilities and the core, destabilising sensibility of modernity – and to do so from their breakfast tables.

This is not to argue that editors published international finance bulletins solely as an act of vanity – as a way to affect modernity or appear well connected. Whilst it is possible that financial bulletins were attractive to editors because they were guaranteed to fill a substantial section of the paper each day, the prominence given to them (they were never displaced by other content), the fact that newspapers had to pay for a subscription to the service, and the specialist appeal of the columns suggests that they were demanded by a significant section of the newspaper readership. In the competitive world of late-Victorian periodical publishing, all elements of the newspaper had to earn their keep, make money and attract readers. Significant numbers of readers therefore must have purchased a paper in order to consume American market reports, although their motives are difficult to determine. It is likely that some may have

73 Marshall Berman, All That is Solid Melts Into Air: 345-346. This now iconic phrase is borrowed from Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels, The Communist Manifesto (1848).
consulted the reports to sound out the state of American competition, but the frequency of the bulletins, and their prioritisation of stock prices above commodities, suggests that a significant number of readers must have been monitoring the health of American investments.

Whilst Britain’s industries struggled against competition from America and Germany, the London financial sector flourished during the 1880s. By 1884, the capital was reportedly home to “over 2,500 brokers and jobbers... trading in around 2000 securities.” Whilst the City emerged in this period as the focal point of Victorian financial culture, it was nevertheless complemented by a regional culture of speculation centred on provincial stock markets. Recent scholarship has demonstrated that the world of business and finance had a pervasive influence on everyday Victorian life and culture. The changing fortunes of a joint-stock company, for example, were not just of interest to workers in the financial sector, but to widows, children, single women, and elderly people who depended upon them for an annual income. As Nancy Henry and Cannon

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Schmitt observe, a new service sector emerged in order to cater for this growing class of investor.78 Among the new professionals employed in this sector was the dedicated financial journalist. The level of interest in the financial sector was enough to support a number of dedicated publications, most notably the Financial News (launched in 1884) and the Financial Times (1888). Indeed, the Financial News, London’s first financial daily, adopted stylistic elements of new journalism such as celebrity gossip, tit-bits, crossheads, reader interaction, suggesting that it had a popular audience in mind.79

During the second half of the nineteenth century British investment culture engaged heavily with overseas markets.80 Whilst much of this capital was invested in imperial territories, a significant amount was speculated on the American market. For those who had the capital and the confidence, the United States offered appealing opportunities. The country’s rapid economic expansion made it possible for shrewd British investors to make quick and healthy profits, but the prospect of these gains was always tempered by the threat of financial collapse. In order to play the market successfully, it was essential to have access to the latest commercial intelligence – a delay in the flow of new information could make the difference between winning or losing. Financial journalism, and daily updates from the New York stock exchange, played a key role in making this kind of transatlantic speculation possible. Crucially, the diffusion of these bulletins allowed the American market to become part of provincial speculative culture; these bulletins appeared side-by-side with reports from regional stock exchanges and allowed significant numbers of residents living outside London to connect each morning with the world of transatlantic finance. These financial encounters with America were imbued with a pervasive

79 Andrew King “Financial News (1884-1940)” : 220.
sense of ‘risk’; one which encouraged American modernity to be conceptualised in Britain as a high-stake game – a world of perils and possibilities, opportunities and disasters.\(^{81}\)

Despite the pervasive presence of American financial reports in the press and the vibrancy of Victorian financial culture, it is likely that many British readers had no interest in decoding this daily jumble of numbers. However, it was not necessary to read these articles in order to gain a peripheral sense of America’s growing economic influence. During the 1880s and 1890s, the space occupied by American financial news in many papers increased significantly. In 1876, for example, the Leeds Mercury distributed its financial coverage across two separate pages. As Fig 2.5 shows, several sub-sections devoted to American matters appeared in this period but the United States occupied a relatively small position. It was, moreover, buried amongst news from British, foreign, and colonial markets. Only those readers who went looking for this information were likely to find it. Ten years later, in 1886, America’s presence had grown. As Fig 2.6 illustrates, the country now commanded more space on both pages. A Reuters’ bulletin had been established on page 4 under the subheading ‘NEW YORK CLOSING PRICES’. The addition of a dedicated American section, complete with its own subheading, significantly increased the country’s visibility, particularly for readers who skimmed the financial pages looking for other content. This was the shape of things to come. By 1896, as Fig 2.7 demonstrates, almost two full columns were dedicated solely to prices from the New York stock exchange and developments in American produce markets. Significantly, the headline ‘NEW YORK STOCK MARKET’ now occupied prime newspaper real estate at the top of its column, where it was likely to be noticed by casual readers. Whilst the Leeds Mercury was unusually generous in the space it afforded financial coverage, this pattern was repeated in other newspapers. The increasing space occupied by American commerce helped give it a growing presence in British culture. Even readers who preferred to focus their attention on columns of fashion advice and court reports would have

\[^{81}\text{For a study of the concept of ‘risk’ in Victorian culture, see: Elaine Freedgood, } \textit{Victorian Writing about Risk: imagining a safe England in a dangerous world,} (Cambridge, 2000)\]
noticed the words ‘American’ and ‘New York’ looming ever larger over the financial pages. Even if these columns sat at the periphery of many Victorians’ reading experiences, we should never discount the power of something which sits constantly in the corner of the eye. It becomes part of the furniture of everyday life.

Whether it was through articles on American competition or daily financial bulletins from New York, by the mid-1880s newspapers had helped to foreground the concept of an ‘inevitable American future’ in the Victorian imagination. Crucially, as America’s power became ever more pervasive, the influence it wielded over British conceptions of the future transcended the purely economic. No longer concerned solely with Britain’s industrial, financial, and commercial prospects, Victorian commentators increasingly speculated about the prospect of a wider form of Americanisation which encompassed social, cultural, and political life. Now that American products had captured the British market, might the Queen’s English be soon replaced by Americanisms? Now that events in New York shaped trade in London, would skyscrapers soon tower over St. Pauls? As British workers struggled to compete with their American cousins, would British athletes soon suffer the same fate? These and countless other debates appeared with increasing regularity, particularly in the 1880s and 1890s. What would this ‘American future’ be like? In order to answer this question, Victorian observers looked to the American present – to the ways in which a distinctive brand of modernity was developing on the other side of the Atlantic. In the next section, we explore the ways in which Victorian newspaper readers encountered and made sense of one of modern America’s defining characteristics – its appetite for ‘bigness’.
Fig 2.5. Pages 4 and 7 from *The Leeds Mercury*, 18 October 1876. Financial news is shaded in green. Sections devoted to America are shaded in red.

Fig 2.6. Pages 4 and 6 from *The Leeds Mercury*, 20 October 1886. Financial news is shaded in green. Sections devoted to America are shaded in red.
Fig 2.7. Pages 4 and 6 from *The Leeds Mercury*, 20 October 1896. Financial news is shaded in green. Sections devoted to America are shaded in red.

‘The Giant of the Future’

Édouard René de Laboulaye, a prominent French thinker, politician, and leading authority on America claimed during the early planning stages for the Statue of Liberty that the size and grandeur of the monument would make the Colossus of Rhodes seem like a “mere clock ornament.” This tantalising hint at the unprecedented scale of the statue caught the British imagination and news of Laboulaye’s dramatic announcement circulated widely within the Victorian press. The monument’s precise dimensions had yet to be released and so British reporters were left to imagine its size. Several newspapers made comparisons with the Colossus of Rhodes and the Pharos of Alexandria, whilst others reported that it would be the largest and most spectacular statue ever constructed. Arguably the most striking image was published by *The Graphic*, who instructed an artist to sketch an impression of how the monument might look.

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82 See, for example: *The Times*, 8 November 1875: 5; *Pall Mall Gazette*, 8 November 1875: 4; *Reynolds’s Newspaper*, 14 November 1875: 2; *Manchester Times*, 13 November 1875: 4; *Jackson’s Oxford Journal*, 13 November 1875: 7; *The Graphic*, 13 November 1875: 2.
once it was erected in New York harbour. The resulting illustration (Fig 2.8) depicted the pedestal straddling the whole of Bedloe’s Island, the statue towering improbably high above the tiny buildings of Manhattan, and six rays of electrified light piercing the darkness from the points of Liberty’s coronet. The scale of the imagined monument, allied to its use of electricity which was then an experimental form of energy, made it a quintessential image of modernity.

Fig 2.8. ‘Statue of Liberty’, The Graphic, 27 November 1875, p. 8.

84 The Graphic, 27 November 1875: 8.
Financial difficulties on both sides of the Atlantic meant that eleven years would pass before these fanciful visions became reality. The wait proved too long for Laboulaye, who suffered an attack of apoplexy on 23 May 1883 and died the next morning. Despite these delays and setbacks, the British press remained fascinated by the scale of the statue and followed its progress closely. Updates appeared frequently in Victorian newspapers and periodicals between 1875 and 1886. In August 1882, the statue’s artist, Frédéric Auguste Bartholdi, captured the press’ imagination by entertaining a luncheon party “in the lower fields of the drapery of the figure,” thereby demonstrating at one stroke the scale of the monument as well as the importance of modern publicity campaigns. The unveiling of the statue made the news in almost every paper in the country, as did its postponed illumination several days later (fig 2.9). For the remainder of the century, the statue appeared sporadically across a range of journalistic genres, including news reports, joke columns, travelogues, children’s corners, sports reports, serialised fiction, science columns, adverts, puzzles, interviews, and even cropped up in the description of a costume worn at one of London’s most fashionable fancy dress balls. It had quickly become an iconic marker of American modernity.

Walter D. Gray, Interpreting American Democracy in France: The Career of Édouard Laboulaye, 1811-1883, (London, 1994): 134. Freeman’s Journal, 30 August 1876: 3; The Morning Post, 31 August 1876: 2; Aberdeen Weekly Journal, 12 September 1879: 2; The Standard, 25 October 1881: 5; The Western Mail, 26 October 1881: 3; The Essex Standard, 29 October 1881: 3; Liverpool Mercury, 14 August 1882: 7; The Graphic, 7 April 1883: 10; The Times, 7 May 1883: 5; The Star (Guernsey), 8 May 1883: 4; Northern Echo, 12 May 1883: 4; The Leeds Mercury, 23 June 1883: 6. The Morning Post, 4 August 1882: 3; The Belfast News-Letter, 10 August 1882: 7; Liverpool Mercury, 14 August 1882: 7. Press coverage of the unveiling is detailed earlier in the chapter. For coverage of the illumination, see: Daily News, 3 November 1886: 6; The Graphic, 20 November 1886: 7. In 1893, a woman dressed as Bartholdi’s Statue (with a fully functioning electric light in her hand) was “much admired” at a fancy dress ball held by Sir Augustus Harris at the Royal Italian Opera House in Covent Garden. See The Era, 11 March 1893, p. 7, for further details. For a sample of other references to the statue between 1886 and 1900, see: Glasgow Herald, 24 November 1886: 8; Aberdeen Weekly Journal, 7 December 1886: 5; The Belfast News-Letter, 26 February 1887: 6; The Pall Mall Gazette, 22 June 1887: 5; The Times, 29 August 1887: 4; The Huddersfield Daily Chronicle, 27 October 1887: 4; Leeds Mercury, 12 November 1887: 5; The Times, 4 April 1888: 14; Hampshire Telegraph, 16 February, 1889: 3; Manchester Times, 8 February 1890: 3; The Blackburn Standard, 23 May 1891: 6; The Graphic, 10 June 1893: 21; The
Fig 2.9. ‘The Illumination of M. Batholdi’s Statue of Liberty in New York Harbour’, *The Graphic*, 20 November 1886, p. 7.

One key feature of the statue remained constantly in focus – its size. News about the monument was regularly signalled with headlines such as ‘GIGANTIC STATUE’, ‘A NEW COLOSSUS’, and ‘THE LARGEST STATUE IN THE WORLD’.\textsuperscript{90} Largely indifferent to the statue’s symbolism and artistic merits, most British reporters concentrated on her vital statistics. When the statue’s hand first arrived in New York, the \textit{Morning Post} filled its account with measurements. “The box containing the hand and wrist is 20ft long and 12 ft high”, it reported with barely concealed amazement, “… and the thumb-nail [is] 2ft. long by 1½ ft. wide.”\textsuperscript{91} Still straining for factual excess, it ended by informing readers that “the charges for freight were nearly $490.”\textsuperscript{92} Similarly, in August 1882, the \textit{Liverpool Mercury} carried a much-reprinted extract from the \textit{Architect} which informed readers that “the weight of the figure will be about 150 tons; the height from head to foot about 110 feet; and from the end of the torch raised in the right hand to the feet, 140 feet.”\textsuperscript{93} “Nothing in the world will rival it in bigness” claimed Stead’s \textit{Pall Mall Gazette}: “it will rise 329 ft. into the astonished air.”\textsuperscript{94} Even the shortest of bulletins often concluded with a sentence reminding readers of the height of the statue.\textsuperscript{95} Those who were not content with stating crude measurements sought to capture the statue’s size in more picturesque terms. Some echoed the spirit of Laboulaye and compared the statue to other monuments, both ancient and modern. “The Colossus of Rhodes... was nothing to it”, declared \textit{The North-Eastern Daily Gazette}, before adding that “it could carry the Bavaria or the Hermann in its arms.”\textsuperscript{96} Others took great delight in describing how many men could fit comfortably inside its head, recline on the thumb nail, or take dinner inside the right foot.\textsuperscript{97}

\textsuperscript{90} \textit{Newcastle Courant}, 18 July 1884: 2; \textit{The Standard}, 8 September 1883: 3; \textit{The North-Eastern Daily Gazette}, 3 July 1884: 3.
\textsuperscript{91} \textit{The Morning Post}, 31 August 1876: 2.
\textsuperscript{92} \textit{The Morning Post}, 31 August 1876: 2.
\textsuperscript{93} \textit{Liverpool Mercury}, 14 August 1882: 7.
\textsuperscript{94} \textit{The Pall Mall Gazette}, 23 April 1884: 4.
\textsuperscript{95} \textit{Western Mail}, 26 October 1881: 3; \textit{Daily News}, 25 October 1881: 3; \textit{The Belfast News-Letter}, 10 August 1882: 7.
\textsuperscript{96} \textit{The North-Eastern Daily Gazette}, 3 July 1884, p. 3.
\textsuperscript{97} \textit{The Morning Post}, 27 June 1883, p. 4; \textit{The Dundee Courier & Argus}, 14 July 1883, p. 3; \textit{The Standard}, 8 September 1883, p. 3; \textit{Berrow’s Worcester Journal}, 23 June 1883, p. 6.
Crucially, whilst the statue was the work of French artists and engineers, its colossal dimensions were interpreted by the British press as characteristically American. Reporting on the dedication ceremony of 1886, the *Glasgow Herald* observed that “the gift of the Colossus by one Republic to another must be gratifying to a people fond of ‘big’ things.”98 “[It] is exactly in keeping with transatlantic notions of appropriateness”, agreed the *Belfast News-Letter*:

The statue is not only the largest in the world, but the largest that has ever existed as well; it will thus be quite in harmony with the country which glories in the possession of the largest lakes, the longest rivers, the tallest trees, and the loftiest and longest mountain range in the world. The statue… would be out of place in any other country except America.99

As the extract suggests, bigness was well established as a defining feature of American identity. In the early years of the Republic, this idea was largely centred on the country’s natural environment – on Niagara Falls, the Rocky Mountains, or the vast expanse of the mid-West prairie.100 During the mid-nineteenth century, ‘bigness’ took on a human element as America began to tame the natural world and forge a cohesive nation through the technological feats of railway engineering and telegraph networks.101 These impressive accomplishments, and America’s reputation for boasting about them to foreign observers, firmly established the idea in Britain that citizens of the United States had an insatiable (and, to some observers, a characteristically vulgar) passion for size. Crucially, during the final decades of the nineteenth century, this appetite for ‘bigness’ began to take on a potent new form – one which was not centred on the natural world, but the landscape of the American city.

When the Statue of Liberty was unveiled in 1886, it was not the only man-made structure in the United States to be widely celebrated. In May 1883 the Brooklyn Bridge – by far the longest and biggest suspension bridge in the world – had been completed and opened to the public. Two years later, the world’s first skyscraper was completed in Chicago. Whilst the Home Insurance Building reached only ten stories (138 ft.), it nonetheless towered over neighbouring buildings

98 *Glasgow Herald*, 4 November 1886: 5.
101 Michael Tavel Clarke, *These Days of Large Things*: 2.
and pioneered engineering techniques which would later be used for taller projects. For the 
remainder of the century, increasingly large office buildings were constructed in both New York 
and Chicago. Having helped to ensure the Statue of Liberty’s survival, Joseph Pulitzer continued to 
redefine the New York skyline in 1890 with the New York World Building. Soaring to a remarkable 
309ft, it became the first building in the city to eclipse the spire of Trinity Church – the highest 
point in New York since its construction in 1846. By 1904, more than a dozen office buildings, 
many of them housing newspaper companies, had broken the same record, including the Park 
Row Building which reached 29 stories in 1898 – 85 feet higher, as one incredulous British 
newspaper observed, than the Statue of Liberty herself. In Chicago, ambitious structures such 
as the Board of Trade Building (1885, 320 ft.), the Masonic Temple (1892, 302 ft.), and the Fisher 
Building (1896, 275 ft.), were also constructed. By 1900, these architectural manifestations of 
modernity had not only reshaped the skyline of New York and Chicago, but transformed the very 
idea of the American city. They formed the landscape in which a new, and quintessentially 
American, urban experience took shape – a modern world, filled with perils and possibilities and 
which exerted a powerful hold over the Victorian imagination.

A number of historians have attempted to unpack America’s fascination with bigness 
during the 1880-1930 period. Robert Wiebe, for example, has argued that a transition from a 
society of decentralised “island communities” to a more integrated, centralised, bureaucratic 
nation created a sense of confusion, anxiety, and instability within American society. “For lack 
of anything that made better sense of their world,” he argues, “people everywhere weighed,

103 David Burg, “The Aesthetics of Bigness in Late Nineteenth Century American Architecture”, *Journal of 
Popular Culture (USA)*, 7:2, (1973): 482-492; Thomas A. P. van Leeuwen, *The Skyward Trend of Thought: The 
metaphysics of the American Skyscraper*, (Massachusetts, 1988); Walter Adams and James Brock, *The 
Bigness Complex: Industry, Labor, and Government in the American Economy*, (New York, 1986); Gary Alan 
(1985): 63-84; Alfred Chandler, *Scale and Scope: The Dynamics of Industrial Capitalism*, (Massachusetts, 
1990).
counted, and measured it.”\(^{105}\) The country’s appetite for bigness was, according to this interpretation, part of a wider “search for order” at a time of confusion and upheaval.\(^{106}\) Whilst Wiebe’s thesis is an interesting one, his desire to conceptualise a love of bigness primarily as a response to the chaos and uncertainty of the *fin de siècle* era does not fit with the pride Americans began to take in the possession of large things as early as the eighteenth century. Cultural historian, Michael Tavel Clarke, has recently proposed an alternative interpretation of Progressive Era America’s “culture of size”. He argues that the pursuit and celebration of bigness was not a reactionary phenomenon, but represented a ‘decisive assertion’ of core American values.\(^{107}\) In particular, he demonstrates that bigness, enlargement and expansion became synonymous in American culture with progress. On one level, building a longer bridge, a bigger statue, or a taller skyscraper was driven by a simple desire to demonstrate progress, whether to the world or to one’s self. During the 1880s and 1890s, the ever-increasing size of New York’s skyscrapers was partly driven by a rivalry between the city’s major newspaper publishers; here was a world in which the prestige of a publication and its editor were signalled by the number of stories in its office building, rather than quality of stories in the paper. During this relatively early stage of urban development, the size of these buildings was as much symbolic as it was functional; it is hard to imagine a more conspicuous display of power and confidence than erecting an enormous tower in a country where copious amounts of land and open space were still available. Crucially, however, bigness was about more than boasting. Its pursuit was, according to Clarke, embedded in the American psyche; a “culture of size”, he argues, was an essential part of the country’s collective identity and played a key role in shaping its response to modernity. However, what Clarke and other historians have yet to fully explore is the way this pervasive ‘culture of size’ was encountered and interpreted outside America. If bigness was so

\(^{106}\) Robert Wiebe, *The Search For Order*.
\(^{107}\) Michael Tavel Clarke, *These Days of Large Things*: 7.
Press encounters with American ‘bigness’ occurred in a variety of journalistic contexts. Firstly, the construction of ever-larger American buildings was often reported in the British press. Whilst few projects could command the level of attention paid to the Statue of Liberty, coverage of the opening of the Brooklyn Bridge and several major skyscrapers attracted significant interest. Once again, British journalists were fixated on size. All manner of facts and statistics were employed in order to communicate the scale of the new structures. The Daily News’ report on the opening of the Brooklyn Bridge, for example, was filled with remarkable measurements, including the length of the span (“1,595½ feet”), the height of the towers (“271 ½ feet”), the length of the suspension cables (“3,678½ feet”), and the cost of the project (“$15,500,000 dols.”). Similarly, when the Park Row building was completed in 1898, the press resorted to a bizarre range of statistics in order to capture the building’s unprecedented size:

To begin with, its height from the side walk... is 390 feet. Thus it is over 100 feet taller than the dome of the capitol at Washington... and within a very few feet of the extreme height of the Pyramids... The flag-poles on the top of the building are 57 feet in height. The foundations extent 54 feet below the surface... The restaurant on top of the main building is 308 feet above the street, whilst the topmost offices... are 340 feet in the air... [It] weighs about 20,000 tons. If all the material were loaded upon heavy street trucks it would require a procession of teams and waggons nearly three miles long to convey it. It would build all the houses of an ordinary sub-urban town, with enough left over to construct a good-sized church.

It is important to recognise that these measurements must have been fed to journalists by somebody involved in the project who knew that size would sell, and this too alerts us to the way in which statistics were widely used in Victorian journalism to measure and make sense of the world. The Victorians’ love of statistics is well attested and newspapers were filled with them. Whether it was the opening of Board Schools in a Northern pit village or the staging of a major
spectacle on the London stage, number-crunching was a familiar method of description. The new scale of life in modern America was particularly well suited to this popular statistical discourse.

In addition to these factual descriptions, newspaper travel writers provided readers with a range of more impressionistic accounts. Few British visitors missed the opportunity to see New York and Chicago, and many attempted to capture the sensation of standing amidst, or atop, the cities’ towers.¹¹¹ Finally, alongside these textual representations, several newspapers and periodicals carried sketches and, later in the century, photographs of large urban structures.¹¹² In 1883, for example, The Graphic printed five different sketches of the Brooklyn Bridge (fig 2.10). In each image, the scale of the bridge is accentuated: in some, its walkways seem to stretch indefinitely into the horizon; in others, the bridge soars imposingly above people, boats, and buildings. Its unique sense of scale renders it both awe-inspiring and discordant – an extraordinary object, transplanted from another world.

Fig 2.10: ‘The New Suspension Bridge Between New York and Brooklyn, USA’, The Graphic, 2
June 1883, p. 10.
It is important to stress that reports about American skyscrapers and suspension bridges did not appear regularly in the British press. Unlike the Yankee humour columns and American market bulletins discussed elsewhere in this study, they were not part of the daily reading experience. Nevertheless, these glimpses of improbable buildings appeared regularly enough for most readers to develop an awareness of their existence and significance. Exploring readers’ responses to these encounters with urban American modernity is not straightforward; but then again, it is not impossible. By drawing on the writings of Victorian travellers, it is possible to identify and unpack a number of literary tropes in which the meaning and significance of tall American buildings were represented and decoded in Britain. Tropes only work if they draw on a range of shared images and meanings, which in turn suggest that such images and meanings were in wide circulation.

Attempts to judge the merits of skyscrapers produced a predictably broad range of opinions. Some were immediately dismissive. “There is nothing beautiful, artistic, or worthy of being imitated by us or any other nation in these skyscrapers,” reported travelling artist, Frederick Villiers, in an article for the *Society of Arts*, “they run high, cost millions, and look ugly.”\(^\text{113}\) Similarly, when a Chicagoan syndicate mooted the possibility of erecting “a building of about twenty or thirty floors” next to Trafalgar Square, *The Graphic* insisted that any attempt “should be at once firmly and conclusively nipped in the bud” on the grounds that London would “be absolutely ruined if the erection of ‘sky-scrapers’ or anything approaching thereto is for a moment permitted.”\(^\text{114}\) It is particularly interesting that such a hostile response came from *The Graphic*. Whilst the paper reported excitedly on the size of the Statue of Liberty, spoke in glowing terms about the Brooklyn Bridge, and commissioned several illustrations of each building, it was prepared to admire America’s passion for size only from a distance. This kind of response was


\(^{114}\) *The Graphic*, 8 December 1900: 24.
informed by the same dynamics of taste which shaped the consumption of American slang.\textsuperscript{115} Just as some Victorians enjoyed reading about Americanisms, but steadfastly refused to use them, so many journalists professed to be fascinated by skyscrapers in New York but were horrified at the thought of them defacing London.

The distinction hinged on matters of taste, culture, and refinement – chiefly the idea that Britain possessed quality and America boasted quantity. Raymond Radclyffe, an influential financial journalist, linked skyscrapers and the ‘culture of size’ to everything that he perceived to be vulgar about modern America:

[Chicago] has no law beyond that of the dollars; no morality and no manners... Its newspapers are filled with the vilest advertisements... The town is mad drunk with the lust of gold. Education, refinement – everything is sacrificed to the need of the hour – money. And, as a result, the only criterion of value is size. A building is praised, not for its beauty, but because it is the biggest. A woman is admired for her chatter, her clothes, her audacity. A man’s integrity is gauged by his bank balance. There is no trade, only speculation; no courage, only recklessness; no humanity, only sentiment.\textsuperscript{116}

It is hard to imagine a more patrician condemnation of American modernity, similar to the critique mounted by the mid-Victorian leisured classes against the perceived vulgarities of the new ‘shock cities’ of the early industrial age.\textsuperscript{117} Core British values – the ‘gentry values’ famously outlined by Martin Wiener – such as ‘morality’, ‘manners’, ‘refinement’, ‘integrity’, ‘courage’ and ‘humanity’ are pitted against avarice, boorishness and a modern fixation with scale.\textsuperscript{118} Within this newly-created world of unrestrained greed and speculation, where bigness is prized over beauty, the skyscraper stood, at least for Victorians like Radclyffe, as the ultimate manifestation of vulgar modernity.

\textsuperscript{115} See Chapter Four.
Not all British commentators responded to the skyscraper in such negative terms. “The city [of Chicago] contains some of the most massive structures that exist,” eulogised a writer for *John Bull*:

Splendid buildings line the chief street – veritable “sky-piercers”…– ten, twelve, sixteen, or more storeys [sic] high. One rising twenty storeys is now soaring heavenward and will soon be finished. Many of them cost £200,000 or more apiece, and all are provided with four to six elevators, or “lifts,” that shoot the passenger into the upper air with dizzying effect and lightning rapidity.\(^\text{119}\)

Similarly, a correspondent for Cardiff’s *Western Mail* was impressed with the scale of the city’s architecture:

Before our very eyes now we are witnessing [the construction of] edifices which, as regards height and magnificence, the world has never gazed upon before…I was admitted to inspect the new Masonic temple…which is just nearing completion. It is twenty stories in height – twenty real practicable stories – with a promenade deck or covered observatory on the top… It is 308ft. high…Sixteen elevators… give access to the various floors of this veritable Tower of Babel… Words fail me.\(^\text{120}\)

This passage once again conjures up Berman’s interpretation of modernity as being characterised by a feeling of inhabiting a state of constant flux – a world where “all that is solid melts into air”.\(^\text{121}\) Whilst Berman’s thesis is not without its critics, his argument that the inherent instability of modernity presented its inhabitants with both *possibilities* and *perils* remains persuasive.\(^\text{122}\) In this case, journalists and readers experienced skyscrapers in wildly contrasting ways: they were perilous symbols of an ugly shallow culture in which quantity always outweighed quality, or they were exhilarating spaces of modernity in which ‘lightning’ fast elevators catapulted passengers to the sky.

The darker side of Berman’s equation often manifested itself. Six days after it opened, the Brooklyn Bridge witnessed a disaster. Believing that it was about to collapse, a crowd of ten

\(^\text{120}\) *Western Mail*, 18 May 1893: 6.
\(^\text{121}\) Marshall Berman, *All That is Solid Melts Into Air*. This now iconic phrase is borrowed from Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (1848).
\(^\text{122}\) See, for example, Bernard Yack, *The Fetishism of Modernities: epochal self-consciousness in contemporary and political thought*, (Notre Dame, Ind, 1997). Yack mischievously responds with the claim that ‘all that is solid is not melting’. 
thousand people attempted to rush off the bridge and stampeded over the bodies of those who fell. At least 12 people were killed, including women and children, and more than 30 seriously injured. News of the tragedy was widely reported in Britain and appeared under sensational headlines such as ‘TERrible Panic on Brooklyn Bridge’ and ‘FeArFul DisAsTer in America’. Harrowing accounts of the incident appeared, including the story of a man who inexplicably punched a woman in the face and allowed her to be trampled to death after she had pleaded with him to protect her. “It was impossible to avoid treading upon the quivering bodies of those who had fallen”, reported The Standard:

Parents in deadly danger held their children aloft and made piteous appeals for the little ones. Lovers fought for their sweethearts like demons. Frantic men with heavy canes beat every head that they could reach... A woman was the first to fall. Her piercing cry rose above the clamour... The appearance of the place and those who emerged was a fearful evidence of the awful nature of the crush. Some had lost their clothing even to the skin; some had their shoes torn off. Faces were discoloured and bloated, eyes were swollen and blinded with weeping, blood exuded from the blue lips of the dead. Some faces had been trodden beyond recognition... One man lost his mind, and raved aloud; several women were in hysterics, and these noises were heightened by the moans of the injured.

This visceral (and much reprinted) account formed the inspiration for a striking two-page illustration in The Penny Illustrated Paper (fig 2.11). In stark contrast to the serenity of the sketches published a week before by The Graphic, the new image depicts a sea of panic-stricken faces, imprisoned, rather than impressed, by the bridge’s bigness.

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124 The Standard, 1 June 1883: 5.
This coverage tapped into two pervasive late-Victorian anxieties surrounding modernity.

Firstly, the Brooklyn tragedy represented a moment in which the terrifying power of the urban ‘crowd’ was unleashed to devastating effect.\textsuperscript{126} Secondly, coverage of the disaster drew upon anxieties surrounding the duality of man which later found expression in responses to Jack the Ripper, W. T. Stead’s “Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon”, Robert Louis Stevenson’s \textit{Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde} (1886), and Wilde’s \textit{Picture of Dorian Grey} (1891).\textsuperscript{127} The catalyst for this panic was the biggest bridge in the world – a flagship of modern engineering and symbol of the age’s hubristic desire to push the boundaries of urban possibility. In truth, the bridge was never in any danger. However, it was believed to have created an atmosphere that encouraged mass panic. It was, in this sense, symbolic of the unnerving instability of modernity – of a world that seemed always on the brink of disaster.

\textbf{Conclusion}

During the final three decades of the nineteenth century, British perceptions of America changed. At the end of the Civil War, the country was still discussed as an unstable political experiment, a former colony which lagged behind Europe in both economic and cultural terms, and a land of vast, but unrealised, potential. By 1900 many Victorians spoke openly about the dawn of a new American century in which Britain would play a subordinate role to the United States. The emergence of this ‘inevitable American future’ in the Victorian imagination was shaped by a number of transatlantic encounters and exchanges, but the press was a particularly key player in weaving representations of America’s new identity into the fabric of everyday British culture.


to demonstrate America’s economic power and foreground the concept of an ‘inevitable American future’ in the Victorian imagination. Within this context, press representations of American modernity assumed a new potency. The country’s pervasive ‘culture of size’ received particular attention from the British press. Descriptions of the modern American city provided opportunities for British readers to make sense of American ‘bigness’ in architectural contexts. Crucially, in the process of discovering this New World, British audiences were compelled to reassess their own sense of national identity. Finding themselves outpaced by the progress of the American economy and dwarfed by the size of the American city they fell back upon other, more intangible, markers of Britishness. The possession of good taste, for example, was increasingly defined in opposition to a ‘vulgar’ American Other. As the political, economic, and even physical balance of power gradually tipped in favour of United States, possession of this kind of cultural capital emerged as a defining feature of British national identity. It was through the cultivation and celebration of cultural values that Britain gradually came to terms with its declining economic and material power, and was able to accommodate itself to the idea of the new American Future.
Chapter Three
American Humour

The ‘American Future’ sometimes arrived in unexpected forms. During the final quarter of the nineteenth century, imported American jokes became a familiar fixture of Victorian newspapers and periodicals and played a significant role in delivering America to an enthusiastic British reading public. The Newcastle Weekly Courant, for example, published a weekly collection entitled ‘Yankee Snacks’. At the other end of the country, the Hampshire Telegraph printed a regular feature called ‘Jonathan’s Jokes’. The North Wales Chronicle had a recurring selection of ‘American Humour’. The Northern Weekly Gazette in Middlesbrough offered ‘Stars and Stripes’. Both the Ipswich Journal and the Isle of Wight Observer carried ‘Yankee Humour’. The Leeds Mercury boasted that its readers “study excellent specimens [of American Humour] from week to week.” Lloyd’s Weekly News introduced a regular column called ‘American Jokes’ in 1895, shortly before it achieved an unprecedented circulation of one million readers. Several provincial and metropolitan papers printed standalone columns of ‘Californian Humour’ or ‘Yankee Notions’, and others scattered American jokes within more generalised columns of ‘Wit and Humour’. Tit-Bits, one of the best-selling weekly magazines in the country, regularly printed one-off American gags and comic anecdotes. Several periodicals dedicated to American humour were launched. Most were short-lived, but the London edition of the Detroit Free Press, which was composed almost entirely of American humour, sold between 100,000 and 300,000 copies a week during the 1880s and 1890s. The presence of American gags was not limited to the popular press. Whilst

1 The Leeds Mercury, April 29th 1882: 1.
4 The London edition of the Detroit Free Press has received little academic recognition. For a rich, but all too brief, summary, see: James Stanford Bradshaw ‘The ‘Detroit Free Press’ In England’, Journalism History, 5:1,
Americans often claimed that “no joke appears in the London Times, save by accident”, even the supposedly high-minded ‘Thunderer’ occasionally used comic American newspaper clippings as column fillers.\(^5\)

By the 1880s, imported American newspaper jokes reached millions of men, women, and children on a weekly basis. Until the arrival of Hollywood cinema, these gags were the United States’ most visible cultural export. Crucially, they did more than make the British public laugh. As this chapter argues, they were steeped in ‘Americana’ and provided British readers with new insights into American life and culture. These seemingly inconsequential gags were central to the early growth of a popular fascination with America and an appetite for its distinctive popular culture. This chapter begins with a brief historiographical review. Part two charts the rise and fall of the imported American joke and attributes its success to the ascent of commercial New Journalism. Part three uses keyword searchable databases to track the movement of American jokes and identifies five core stages in their lifecycle. The final sections of the chapter unpack the presence and consumption of American jokes and analyses what they reveal about the Victorian relationship with America.

The place of American humour in nineteenth-century Britain has received relatively little attention from cultural historians. Existing research has been produced largely by literary critics and focuses overwhelmingly on the work of individual literary humourists. Mark Twain’s experiences in England have been recounted by biographers, and the British response to his work has been debated by a number of scholars.\(^6\) Dennis Welland has contributed a detailed study of

\(^5\) The Times, 31 May 1850: 8. The American jibe at The Times was recorded by a number of British travel writers. See: James Fullarton Muirhead, The Land of Contrasts: A Briton’s View of His American Kin, (London, 1898): 148; Emily Faithful, Three Visits To America, (Edinburgh, 1884): 345.

Twain’s relationship with his British publishers, and John S. Batts has explored his influence on Jerome K. Jerome.\textsuperscript{7} Victorian responses to Artemus Ward and James Russell Lowell have also received some consideration, but the reception of most American humourists has yet to be adequately explored.\textsuperscript{8} Nils Erik Enkvist’s \textit{American Humour in England before Mark Twain}, published in 1953, remains the only broad treatment of the subject.\textsuperscript{9} Enkvist skilfully charts the emergence of American humour in Britain, and ventures some explanations as to its popularity. However, at less than 70 pages, his brief account glosses over topics which merit closer consideration. Moreover, Enkvist ends his survey in 1870, omitting what proves to be a key period in Anglo-American cultural relations between 1870 and 1900. Nevertheless, his decision to explore popular, as well as critical, responses to American humour is commendable, as is his willingness to look, if only briefly, beyond the familiar group of literary elites.

This chapter builds upon Enkvist’s long-neglected groundwork. As well as arguing that American humour requires attention from cultural historians, it addresses two key weaknesses in the existing body of literary scholarship. Firstly, it argues that by focusing on a select group of celebrated humourists, researchers have overlooked the importance of the popular press. The presence of American jokes in British newspapers is rarely granted more than a passing acknowledgement; Enkvist, for example, devotes little more than a paragraph to the subject.\textsuperscript{10} And yet, these seemingly ephemeral texts enjoyed a greater circulation in late-Victorian Britain than even the most popular works of literary humour. We have already noted that Chatto &

\textsuperscript{9} Nils Erik Enkvist, \textit{American Humour in England Before Mark Twain}, (Abo, 1953).
\textsuperscript{10} W. T. Stead, “Mark Twain’s New Book”, \textit{Review of Reviews}, 1:2, (1890):144-156, (144); Renolds’s \textit{Newspaper}, 16 February 1890: 3.
Windus sold 1,150,000 copies of Mark Twain’s works to the British public during his lifetime whilst an American newspaper joke published in Lloyd’s Weekly News reached a similar sized audience in a single week.\textsuperscript{11} This is not to suggest that circulation figures are always the best measure of cultural significance. As Mandler argues, “texts gain power not only from the breadth of their circulation but also by the imaginative work they do”.\textsuperscript{12} Nor does this chapter argue that literary humourists such as Twain and Ward were comparatively unimportant. Rather, it demonstrates that it is impossible to make sense of British responses to literary American humour without reference to the wider cultural context in which the consumption of these texts was embedded. Many of the same people who read Innocents Abroad, or went to see Artemus Ward perform at the Egyptian Hall, were reading columns of American jokes in their Sunday newspapers. They were all part of the same cultural landscape and cannot be understood in isolation.

The second key weakness of literary scholarship on American humour centres on the source material used to explore British opinion. Most research draws heavily upon the work of literary critics and essayists writing in weighty monthly reviews. These sources offer valuable insights into how American humour was received by the Victorian critical class, but shed little light on how it was consumed and understood by more popular audiences. This can often lead to misleading conclusions about ‘Victorian’ opinion. For example, it is generally argued that the Victorian response to Twain’s Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court was overwhelmingly negative. Its satirical attack on English society and sideways look at history won it few friends among conservative reviewers, but it was championed by voices in the radical press such as W. T. Stead and Reynolds’ Newspaper.\textsuperscript{13} Stead, never one to resist hyperbole, confidently proclaimed that the “mass of the English people” would side with Twain rather than his critics.\textsuperscript{14} John S. Batts, to take another literary study, argues that middle-class England remained loyal to traditional

\textsuperscript{12} Peter Mandler, “The Problem with Cultural History”, Cultural and Social History, 1, (2004): 94-117, (103)
\textsuperscript{13} Reynolds’s Newspaper, 16 February 1890: 3.
\textsuperscript{14} W. T. Stead, “Mark Twain’s New Book”: 144.
English humour and “felt at best ambivalent” towards American imports. This sweeping generalisation is supported almost exclusively with evidence from Punch. Whilst the magazine held an important place in Victorian culture, it should not be regarded as the only mouthpiece of Victorian opinion, particularly given its unfriendly attitude towards America.

In order to make sense of the presence of American humour in Britain, it is necessary to move beyond the familiar voices of Punch and elite literary critics and explore a more popular response. Accessing these readers is naturally problematic. Enkvist lists the sales figures of different American humourists in an attempt to “show us something of popular, as opposed to critical, taste.” As useful as these statistics are, they reveal relatively little beyond the presence of a popular demand for American humour. Shifting our focus away from critical responses to literary humour and onto popular newspapers allows us to access and unpack public tastes in more detail. By focusing on commentary in these newspapers, by examining how jokes were marketed by commercially astute editors, by tracking how they were reused in other contexts, and by exploring the content of the jokes themselves, this chapter attempts to offer a more nuanced perspective on the Victorian response to American humour.

Literary scholars are by no means the only group to underestimate the significance of newspaper humour in late-Victorian popular culture. Media historians, best placed to recognise its importance, have also afforded it little attention. Joke columns are regularly identified as a characteristic feature of late-Victorian New Journalism, but have received far less attention than crime reports, sensational exposes, sports coverage, serialised fiction, household columns, and other emerging journalistic genres. Aside from my own entry on ‘American Humour’, the Dictionary of Nineteenth-Century Journalism currently makes only passing references to jokes.
Similarly, whilst *Tit-Bits* filled its front page with British and American jokes each week, Kate Jackson’s otherwise excellent work on the magazine mentions them only in passing. David Reed also identifies the presence of jokes in popular magazines such as *Tit-Bits, Pearson’s* and *Answers*, as well as the twentieth-century publications they inspired, but offers no commentary on the jokes themselves. Jokes may have been ephemeral and artistically lightweight, but they should nevertheless be regarded as a distinctive, and important, journalistic genre – one which played a central role in the success of commercial new journalism.

Whilst nineteenth-century newspaper jokes have yet to receive the attention they deserve, the cultural history of humour is the subject of increasing academic interest. Over the course of the last two decades there has been a growing recognition among cultural historians that humour can offer a powerful “key to the cultural codes and sensibilities of the past”; that the study of laughter “can take us to the heart of a generation’s shifting attitudes, sensibilities and anxieties”. This has resulted in a wealth of valuable new research. A number of early modern historians, for example, have begun to use the period’s ‘jest-books’ to shed new light on the everyday workings of a historically distant society. One of the strongest examples of this new body of scholarship is Vic Gatrell’s *City of Laughter*, which uses satirical and humorous prints to explore “the stories, jokes and satirical exposures that later Georgian English people found funny”, and examines what this tells us “about their views of the world [and] their own

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18 Kate Jackson, *The Tit-Bits Phenomenon*: 201-226, (203, 205); Kate Jackson, *George Newnes and the New Journalism in Britain*: 56, 74, 172.
21 For an overview of this literature, see: Jessica Milner Davis, *Farce (New Ed.)*, (New Brunswick, 2002): 35-36. A lengthy research bibliography is also included with Jan Bremmer and Herman Roodeburg (eds.), *A Cultural History of Humour*.
pretensions”. Gatrell also explores how tastes in humour changed over the period. In particular, these sources allowed Gatrell to challenge dominant conceptions of the late-Georgian period as an age of politeness. The humour of the period and the way it was consumed, he argues, offers compelling evidence for an extensive metropolitan culture of impoliteness. In other words, the study of humour allowed him to say new and important things about the social and cultural values of an age; it is, he rightly argues, “as plausibly a historian’s subject as any other.”

However, a set of enduring misconceptions about the Victorian sense of humour (or lack of it) have restricted much of this new research to earlier periods and other countries. As Wagner-Lawlor observes, even Victorianists “tend to think of the Victorian Sage before they think of a Victorian Harlequin”. The idea that the Victorian era was repressively serious, though long since challenged by historians, remains in popular circulation and can sometimes underpin the assumptions of even the best academic work in the field. As recently as 2006, for example, Gatrell ended his study with the ‘watershed’ decade of the 1820s, after which, he argues, the bawdy, bodily humour and racy satire of the Georgian period was silenced for a hundred and fifty years by ‘respectable,’ ‘squeamish,’ ‘fastidious,’ and ‘moralising’ members of the ascendant Victorian bourgeoisie. Whilst it would be naïve to dismiss the changes in manners which took place during the early decades of the nineteenth century, it is equally important to recognise that humour continued to occupy an important position in both popular and elite culture. The uninhibited ‘bum and fart’ jokes of Gatrell’s caricatures slipped (though never entirely) out of vogue, but they were replaced by other forms of humour which performed equally important cultural work and which now offer cultural historians valuable insights into Victorian society.

23 Win Gatrell, City of Laughter: 4.
24 Vic Gatrell, City of Laughter: 5.
26 Vic Gatrell, City of Laughter: 19.
Gatrell’s claim that the historiography of eighteenth and nineteenth-century British humour “hardly exists” is slightly overstated. Whilst ancient, medieval, and early-modern comedy has certainly received more attention from cultural historians, it would be misleading to suggest that Victorian humour has remained entirely unexplored. The chief contribution comes from literary historians who have tended to focus on problems of genre and literary tradition, or to explore the structural landscapes of type and motif. Those who have been more open to situating humour within its cultural context have nevertheless focused primarily on canonical literary texts. Roger B. Henkle’s promisingly titled Comedy and Culture: England 1820-1900 is, for example, structured predominantly around the work of nineteenth-century literary giants such as Thackeray, Jerrold, Dickens, Hood, Gilbert, Carroll, Meredith, Butler, Wilde, and Beerbohm.28 Similarly, whilst The Victorian Comic Spirit adopts a slightly wider focus, the majority of the essays are still centred on figures such as Gilbert and Sullivan, Gaskell, Dickens, Carlyle, Wilde, Ryder Haggard, and Jerome K. Jerome.29

When historians have sought to discover what made the Victorians laugh, they have turned predominantly to Punch. Much like The Times, it has long been one of the key ways in which nineteenth-century scholars have attempted to capture the Victorian zeitgeist and access the changing nature of middle-class opinion. However, like The Times, its usefulness as a source has distorted conceptions of its typicality.30 Punch’s politically engaged brand of satirical wit was representative of just one form of Victorian humour; the vast majority of the Victorian public were consuming very different kinds of jokes. Research into popular humour currently focuses on the music hall, pantomime, burlesque, clowns, and on Ally Sloper’s Half Holiday — a popular comic weekly which chronicled the picaresque misadventures of a working-class man and his family.31

31 For a sample of work on music hall, see: Peter Bailey (ed.), Music Hall: the business of pleasure, (Milton Keynes, 1986); Jacqueline Bratton (ed.), Music Hall: performance and style, (Milton Keynes, 1986); Barry J.
This body of scholarship has demonstrated how the study of popular humour can reveal valuable new insights into hitherto underexplored areas of Victorian life and culture. However, this analysis has yet to be extended to newspaper jokes – the most pervasive and commercially successful form of humour in the country. To paraphrase an earlier point, these gags were part of the same cultural landscape as music hall songs, pantomimes, and comics and they reveal just as much about the world that produced and consumed them. Whilst this chapter focuses its attention on the distinctive sub-genre of imported American jokes, other forms of newspaper humour are also deserving of greater consideration from cultural historians.

This chapter also engages with a series of long-running theoretical debates on the relationship between humour and power. In his influential study of renaissance folk culture, Mikhail Bakhtin emphasized the subversive power of popular humour. Elite figures such as priests, royals, and officials were, he argued, debased through acts of public mockery and laughter. At the centre of this process was the carnival; an event which “celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order” and upturned established hierarchies, norms, and privileges. Historians and anthropologists have used Bakhtin’s concept of the ‘carnivalesque’ to explore how similar acts of subversion were performed in other cultural


events and texts. It is certainly possible to approach American newspaper humour in this fashion; to interpret a joke, a humour column, or a popular weekly newspaper as a carnivalesque space in which dominant Victorian codes were challenged and subverted. However, Bakhtin’s thesis has since been challenged by cultural historians who have argued that the temporariness of carnival, and other forms of officially sanctioned popular laughter, made them politically toothless.34 Umberto Eco argues that “comedy and carnival are not instances of real transgressions: on the contrary, they represent paramount examples of law reinforcement. They remind us of the existence of the rule.”35 This interpretation of humour as a fundamentally conservative, rather than destabilising, force is equally plausible and could also be applied to American newspaper jokes. For example, by associating transgressive or subversive behaviour explicitly with America, the ‘correctness’ of dominant British cultural codes and social hierarchies may well have been reinforced. By the same token, these jokes can be seen as mass-produced, standardised commodities in a highly-capitalised market place. According to this view, their consumption served the interests not only of newspaper proprietors seeking greater profits but were part of a more pervasive ideological control of readers. Alongside music halls and commercialised sporting activities, humour columns offered working people a form of comic stoicism in the face of appalling living and working conditions. Instead of challenging the dominant political structures of their society, these jokes helped persuade late-Victorian and Edwardian consumers to embrace a depoliticised leisure culture, or what Stedman Jones most memorably called a “culture of consolation”.36

This radical/conservative dichotomy is not limited to debates over the power of carnival. For more than a century, attempts to establish a universal theory of humour have centred on similar issues. In the early decades of the twentieth century, French philosopher, Henri Bergson, argued that laughter functions as a natural, stabilising force which acts to ‘correct’ or ‘punish’ behaviour which was is not in harmony with its environment. Similarly, in his psychological analysis of jokes, Freud argued that laughter acted as a ‘safety-valve’ for the subconscious; a way to release repressed tensions safely and satisfy impulses which could not be expressed consciously. In both cases, humour is seen as a stabilising force; a way to release aggression or direct it at things which challenge the status quo. These theories have informed debates on domination and resistance. The idea that laughter acts as a ‘safety-valve’ through which a dominated class can vent its frustrations harmlessly continues to enjoy a wide currency.

However, as a number of scholars have since argued, humour can also be a “weapon of the weak;” a form of protest against dominant groups and hierarchies. Anthropologist, Donna Goldstein, has explored how the downtrodden female inhabitants of a Brazilian favela make jokes about rape and murder in order to resist and make sense of the chaos and injustice that invades their everyday lives. Whilst these kinds of protest rarely effect a permanent upturning of society, they nevertheless form an important ‘counter theatre’ through which dominated classes assert their identity. This leaves us with a familiar contradiction: humour, it seems, offers an overview of the theoretical context to this debate, see Hugh Mackay (ed.), Consumption and Everyday Life, (London, 1997): 1-12.


38 Sigmund Freud, Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious (1905).


opportunity for both the exercise and control of popular aggression; it is capable of being both a conservative and a disorganising force.

A study of American newspaper humour gets us no closer to solving this age-old ‘subversive’ versus ‘conservative’ dichotomy. As this chapter demonstrates, these jokes presented opportunities for both the subversion and reinforcement of dominant codes; a chance for people of all classes to laugh at both Britain and America. However, recent scholarship has stressed the need to move beyond questioning whether humour is inherently radical or conservative. Rather than attempt to produce a universal ‘ontology of humour’, cultural historians such as Jan Bremmer and Herman Roodenberg stress that humour is neither transcultural nor ahistorical but embedded within a specific context. In order to ‘get’ a joke, as Goldstein argues, it is essential to unpack and make sense of the social and cultural landscape in which it was produced and circulated. In the process, the study of humour offers an opportunity to explore past cultures from new perspectives; as Goldstein argues, “it opens up a world of meanings... that would otherwise remain hidden and unknown.” This chapter applies a similar approach in its analysis of the complex web of Anglo-American cultural politics which shaped the production, importation, and consumption of American newspaper jokes. In the process, it reveals new insights into the Victorian’s relationship with both America and themselves.

The rise and fall of the American humour column

The first piece of American Humour to achieve widespread popular success in Britain came, paradoxically, from the pen of a Canadian. In 1835, Thomas Chandler Haliburton began to

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publish a series of humorous short stories in *The Novascotian* detailing the sayings and doings of Sam Slick, a travelling clock-pedlar from the fictional town of Slickville, Onion County, Connecticut, who delighted audiences with his witty, home-spun opinions on North American life. The sketches proved extremely popular and the first thirty-six instalments were collected and published in Britain as *The Clockmaker* in 1837. The first series was warmly received by British critics and proved so successful that a second collection was published in 1838 and a third in 1840. Two series of *The Attaché, or, Sam Slick in England* appeared in 1843 and 1844, and were followed a decade later by *Sam Slick's Wise Saws and Modern Instances, or, What He Said, Did, or Invented* (1853) and two volumes of *Nature and Human Nature* (1855).\(^{47}\) Haliburton’s creation enjoyed an enduring popularity with British audiences. Routledge & Sons were still publishing new editions of his books in the 1890s.\(^{48}\) When the author died in 1865, obituary writers still described Sam Slick as “the dominant figure among the heroes of American Humour,” and the press continued to print his ‘world famous’ sayings well into the 1890s.\(^{49}\)

The success of Sam Slick paved the way for the importation of other works of American humour. Several anthologies appeared in Britain shortly after *The Clockmaker*’s first success. *Yankee Notions: A Medley* (1838), *American Broad Grins* (1838), *Broad Grins, or Joe Miller in America* (1839), and a short-lived series of *American Miscellany* (1839-1840) contained selections of American jokes, comic poems, and humorous literary extracts, and achieved moderate success. Less successful books devoted to other heroes of American humour, such as the frontiersman Davy Crockett and a homespun Yankee named Jack Downing (from Downingville, Down East), were also published in Britain during the 1830s.\(^{50}\) Whilst none of these achieved the level of

\(^{47}\) For a brief summary of Sam Slick’s success in England, see Nils Erik Enkvist, *American Humour in Britain before Mark Twain*: 28-36. Sales figures for his books are provided in an appendix.


\(^{49}\) For an indication of Sam Slick’s longevity in the Victorian imagination, see: *The Pall Mall Gazette*, 27 April 1870: 2; *The Graphic*, 28 June 1879: 30; *Hampshire Telegraph*, 19 April 1884: 4; *North Wales Chronicle*, 27 December 1890: 3.

\(^{50}\) See, for example: A Narrative of the Life of David Crockett…Written by Himself, (1834); Sketches and Eccentricities of Col. David Crockett of West Tennessee, (1834); Colonel Crockett’s Exploits and Adventures in Texas, (1837); Seba Smith, *The Life and Writings of Major Jack Downing, of Downingville, away down east in
success of *The Clockmaker*, they collectively contributed to a growing recognition in Britain that a new style of humour was beginning to take shape on the other side of the Atlantic.

It was at this point that the British press began to import humorous clippings from American newspapers. These jokes were occasionally collected into dedicated columns. For example, *The Northern Liberator*, a short-lived mouthpiece of the Newcastle Chartists, published six joke columns entitled “Whims of Jonathan” and two columns called “Scraps from the Far West” as early as 1839. As a radical paper, the *Northern Liberator* looked admiringly at the United States and it is no surprise that it was quick to celebrate the products of American popular culture. However, American newspaper jokes also appeared in conservative and politically neutral papers. Until the 1870s, these extracts were most commonly placed amongst other humorous, factual, or unusual clippings under generic titles such as ‘miscellaneous’, ‘varieties’, ‘gleanings,’ or ‘Our Carpet Bag’ and took a variety of forms. Some were straightforward jokes. In March 1853, for example, *Trewman’s Exeter Flying Post* acquired an innuendo-based gag from an American paper about an Irish servant girl who misplaced a letter of recommendation whilst travelling to her new job – “she had a good character when she left Albany, but lost it on board the steamer coming down” – and printed it alongside a column of “scraps from Punch”. Other jokes were dressed up as factual tit-bits or phony news stories. “There is a lady in Pennsylvania”, claimed one such jest, “who is so thin that only one person can look at her at once.” In some newspapers, these jokes appeared side-by-side with genuine news stories and other pieces of miscellaneous gossip, blurring the line between fact and fiction.

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*the state of Maine*, (1834); *The Letters of Jack Downing, Major, to Mr. Dwight, of the New-York Daily Advertiser*, (1835).

51 A column of American jokes appeared in the paper each week between 7 September 1839 and 26 October 1839.

52 There are far too many instances of this practice to list here. However, for a sample, see: *The Preston Guardian*, 7 December 1850: 8; *Reynolds’s Newspaper*, 25 January 1852: 5; *The Northern Star*, 30 January 1841: 6; *The Era*, 9 May 1841: 3.


54 *The Northern Liberator*, 19 October 1839: 3.
Others were not jokes at all. British audiences seemed to take particular pleasure in reading the racy comments of irreverent American journalists. *The Leeds Mercury*, for example, carried a clipping from an ‘American Paper’ describing one of the country’s most admired politicians in withering terms: “his handwriting can’t be deciphered without the aid of a pair of compasses and a quadrant. His autograph somewhat resembles the map of Ohio, and looks like a piece of crayon sketching, done in the dark with a three-pronged fork.”\(^{55}\) Whilst some radical and unstamped papers mounted similar verbal attacks on prominent figures in the political and social establishment, most British newspapers avoided these extremes and prided themselves on maintaining a measured and respectable style. Indeed, one of the dominant characteristics of the American popular press that exercised many British commentators during debates on newspaper taxes in the 1850s was its perceived tendency towards ‘scurrility’. If the stamp duties on newspapers were lifted in Britain, they asked, would our native press follow a similar trajectory?\(^{56}\) The debate was still going on thirty years later, but by cutting and pasting examples of American raciness, British editors and readers could get the best of both worlds; they could enjoy a style of journalism that transgressed British codes of respectability, whilst still maintaining a suitable cultural distance.

These columns of miscellaneous clippings were the forerunners of what would eventually become dedicated American humour columns. As the century progressed, editors gradually increased the volume of American content until, by the 1870s, it became increasingly common to find a miscellany column composed entirely of Yankee jokes. For example, in August 1874 the ‘Varieties’ column of *The Preston Guardian* was dominated by comic clippings about: an Ohio jockey, a father and his boy from Wisconsin, a cemetery in Indiana, a farmer from Boston, a murderer from Delaware, a Virginian sheriff, a widower from Illinois, a tramp from Connecticut,

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\(^{55}\)*The Leeds Mercury*, 1 May 1852: 12. The except was printed, word for word, in *The Preston Guardian* on the same day.

\(^{56}\) *Report from the Select Committee on Newspaper Stamps, Minutes of Evidence, July 1851*, Parliamentary Papers. See evidence of M.J. Whitty, 613-617; 660-666; 691-704. Also evidence of H. Greeley, 3035, 3036
and two Quakers from New York.\textsuperscript{57} Similarly, the ‘Scraps’ column of \textit{The Hull Packet} in June 1876 included humorous stories about: an ambitious American youth, the weight of Missourian pigs, Fourth of July celebrations in Illinois, a boastful American shipbuilder, plans to build an oyster saloon at Long Island, various characters on an American train, a reformed thief from Detroit, a husband and wife from Alabama, a Jewish man visiting an American church, the inventions of an American professor, an “intelligent old darkey”, a Mississippian grocer, and a lengthy comic anecdote entitled “The Yankee Lawyer and the Pig.”\textsuperscript{58} It is worth listing these themes for they illustrate how the texture of an imagined everyday life in modern America was therefore encountered by British readers of joke columns on a regular basis. There were laughs to be had from such material, but they also delivered representations of American characters, landscapes, language, and lifestyles.

Some editors continued to print these clippings as part of general humour miscellanies but, by the 1880s, many newspapers had decided to repackage their American imports as part of dedicated humour columns. Whilst each newspaper evolved at its own pace and made these changes at different times, the example of \textit{The Newcastle Weekly Courant} is broadly representative of the pattern followed by other publications. In January 1869, the Courant began to publish a column of “Wit and Humour” drawn “from the comic papers and other sources”.\textsuperscript{59} This new feature was composed predominantly of British humour but began to take on an increasingly American flavour during the 1870s. ‘Wit and Humour’ was renamed ‘Varieties’ in February 1876 and, in July of the same year, a regular ‘American Humour’ subsection was introduced.\textsuperscript{60} This remained a regular, and increasingly dominant, feature until April 1888 when a longer, standalone ‘American Humour’ column was launched.\textsuperscript{61} This column ran virtually uninterrupted until 1891, when it was rebranded ‘Yankee Snacks’, and continued under this new

\textsuperscript{57} \textit{The Preston Guardian}, 22 August 1874: 2.
\textsuperscript{58} \textit{The Hull Packet}, 2 June 1876: 3.
\textsuperscript{59} \textit{The Newcastle Courant}, 29 January 1869: 3.
\textsuperscript{60} \textit{The Newcastle Courant}, 7 July 1876: 2.
\textsuperscript{61} \textit{The Newcastle Weekly Courant}, 6 April 1888: 3.
name for almost 300 further weekly instalments until November 1896. After this point, American jokes continued to appear in general humour columns for the remainder of the century.

The driving force behind the rise of the dedicated American Humour column was the ascendency of snippet journalism outlined in Chapter One. For example, when the *Hampshire Telegraph* introduced a new weekly supplement in 1883, this new textual space proved to be an ideal inducement for the importation of American jokes. Within weeks the paper began to include them in its regular column of ‘Humorous Selections’. Dedicated American humour columns soon appeared sporadically alongside these more eclectic collections of wit until July 1884, when two lengthy columns named “Jonathan’s Jokes” and “John Bull’s Jokes” were introduced and published side by side. This format remained unchanged until 1887 when “Jonathan’s Jokes” was rebranded as “Cap and Bells: Yankee Quips and Cranks” and published separately. This column of American humour appeared uninterrupted each week under a variety of different titles until August 1892, after which it maintained a more intermittent presence until the end of the nineteenth century. Similar patterns played out in a variety of metropolitan and provincial papers. For example, in 1895 the *Northern Weekly Gazette* (Middlesbrough) was re-launched with an updated new format which drew heavily upon similar magazine features. Within weeks of the redesign, a regular column of American jokes began to appear near the front of the paper and was even advertised on the front page. At the height of their popularity, columns of American jokes were a regular feature of popular weekly newspapers across the country. Here was a distinctive and highly successful journalistic genre. As a feature of commercial new journalism, it was every bit as pervasive as sports’ reporting, sensational court cases, promotional competitions, and serialised fiction.

Tracking the rise of the American humour column is relatively straightforward; tracking its decline is more problematic. The height of its popularity seems have been between 1875 and

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By the 1890s, there are some indications that its appeal was on the wane. A reporter for The Licensed Victuallers’ Mirror observed in 1891 that whilst American jokes had once sent British audiences “into ecstasies” they had been “deluged” for so many years that the novelty had now worn off. “Like every other good thing”, he argued, “we had a little too much of it, and began to think that the fountain had pretty well run dry.”63 These observations were a little too premature. Two years later, a writer in the Essex County Standard was still predicting that the public’s appetite for American jokes – which he likened to the peculiar, but “easily acquired”, taste for tomatoes – would sooner or later be played out.64 The Hampshire Telegraph, the Newcastle Weekly Courant, and the Ipswich Journal all discontinued their regular columns during the middle of the 1890s, suggesting that readers had indeed grown tired.65 However, this pattern was not universal. Both the Northern Weekly Gazette and the Isle of Wight Observer embraced American humour at the same time as other papers were dropping it. Similarly, Lloyd’s Weekly News – the most popular weekly paper in the country – introduced its own column of ‘American Jokes’ in 1895 and continued to publish them beyond 1900. Their appeal remained sufficiently strong for The Daily Mirror to print six instalments of comic American press clippings in 1906.66

Whilst American jokes continued to appear sporadically in British papers during the Edwardian period, they became increasingly less pervasive until, by the inter-war period, they had been almost entirely phased out. By this point, of course, we begin to see the emerging influence of American films in British popular culture. Indeed, the decline of the American humour column may well be linked to the arrival of these films. As subsequent sections of this article argue, they both appear to have fulfilled very similar functions for British consumers. For almost three decades, imported jokes played a key role in shaping the British public’s relationship with America

63The Licensed Victuallers’ Mirror, 21 July 1891: 1.
64Essex County Standard, 4 March 1893: 3.
65All, however, continued to print occasional scatterings of American jokes until the end of the century.
and satisfying a widespread demand for a new urban-based form of popular culture that was developing on the other side of the Atlantic. Hollywood cinema, popular music, television and other forms of twentieth-century American popular culture replaced these older mediums of communication with new and arguably more potent forms, but were nonetheless built on the cultural foundations laid down in the last two decades of the Victorian era.

The Lifecycle of the American Joke

Tracking the development and circulation of individual American jokes presents a methodological challenge. They originated from many sources and did not travel through a single channel. Unlike news stories, their value did not depreciate by the hour and, as a result, months and sometimes years would pass between the publication of a joke and its appearance in another paper. Using conventional archival research methods, it is extremely difficult to follow these tiny paragraphs as they move around a vast *terra incognita* of transatlantic print. However, the digitisation of nineteenth-century newspapers and periodicals offers new ways of addressing this problem. Using keyword searches, it is possible to locate a joke in a variety of British and American newspapers and build up a sense of how, where, and when it travelled. This methodology is not without its drawbacks; only a fraction of British and American periodicals have been digitised, and the accuracy of OCR scanning is not yet perfect. This means that the full life of a joke cannot be mapped out; we cannot uncover all of the instances in which it was published, and may well end up missing important stages in its development and circulation. Nevertheless, it is possible to build up a general picture of how jokes moved across at the Atlantic. This section of the chapter sets out five key stages in the circulation of American newspaper jokes: (i) authorship, (ii) American circulation, (iii) importation to Britain, (iv) British circulation, (v) British retelling. These phases represent the full journey of the most successful American jokes. Many gags did not reach stages four and five, and some failed to move beyond stage one. Similarly, some jokes skipped
stages or completed them out of sequence. What follows, therefore, is not a definitive description of how all jokes crossed the Atlantic. Nevertheless, it provides a useful framework for understanding how the work of American joke writers ended up in British newspapers, and how American popular culture was mediated for a British audience.

(i) Authorship

Ascertaining the author of an American newspaper joke is a difficult task. By the time they appeared in Britain, many had been stripped of any attribution. Even when the original publication is discovered, it is virtually impossible to uncover the specific author. Jokes were contributed to newspapers and periodicals by a variety of figures. Staffers working at the offices of daily newspapers were reportedly encouraged to write jokes in order to fill space, and some editors contributed their own gags. Most material, however, came from professional joke writers. Major newspapers employed their own dedicated humourists. The names of some, such as M. Quad of the *Detroit Free Press* and the Danbury News Man, were known to British readers, but even in America the majority of professional joke writers were unknown to their audience.

Many were not attached to specific papers but worked freelance, submitting jokes to newspapers and comic periodicals in return for between twenty-five cents and five dollars an item. Some writers contributed occasional jokes to generate supplementary income whilst working on loftier projects. Others, such as Thomas L. Masson, dedicated considerable energy to feeding what Daniel Wickberg describes as a late nineteenth-century ‘joke market.’

Whilst working as a traveling salesman in New York, Masson began submitting jokes and humourous essays to *Life* – one of the period’s most successful comic periodicals. His work was well received and he was eventually rewarded with a permanent job. Between 1893 and 1922, he acted as managing and literary editor of the magazine. During this period, he also contributed a

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68 M. Quad was the pen name of Charles Bertrand Lewis, and the real identity of the Danbury News Man was J. M. Bailey.
significant amount of material. In a remarkable essay entitled ‘How I wrote 50,000 jokes’, he explains how, over the course of twenty years, he produced an average of fifty jokes a week. At the height of his powers, he claims to have written as many as a hundred jokes in a single day and to have been capable of churning out sixty inside two hours. Seventy five per cent of these jokes were bought by editors, at an average cost of one dollar, providing Masson with a total of $35,000 for what he estimated to be two hours’ work per week.

The extraordinary productivity of professional joke writers, such as Masson, meant that even a booming joke market could support only a small number of producers. Wickberg estimates that the market was dominated by “fifteen to twenty men and women who anonymously scribed the vast majority of jokes found in magazines and daily papers.” This assertion is supported by a contemporary article published in the *New York World*, which claims that 90 per cent of American newspaper jokes were written by a small group of writers. “The Joke Writers Guild is a close corporation,” it argued, “and a very few men are responsible for all our fun.” It is possible to identify the names of a number of these figures – R. K. Munkittrick, Charles W. Foster, John Kendrick Bangs, Dr. E. Graham Dewey, Percival R. Benson, Williston Fish, Tom Hall, George A. Beckenbaugh, Roy L. McCardell – but few of these individuals can be linked to specific jokes. Unpacking their careers will reveal valuable new insights into the production of American popular culture, and one that has obvious parallels to the highly-commercialised song-writing business associated with the Brill Building in the mid-twentieth century, but such an undertaking lies beyond the scope of this thesis. Moreover, for British readers, most of these names were meaningless; it mattered only that the author appeared to be American.

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73 Daniel Wickberg, *The Senses of humour*: 139-140.
Almost every popular newspaper and magazine in America included a scattering of jokes. However, rather than produce or commission this material themselves, most papers (particularly small provincial publications) clipped their jokes from other sources. For example, the following joke originally appeared in the New York Sun in December 1890:

An ingenious four-year-old boy up town amazed his father a day or two ago by swaggering into the parental presence with the remark: “Papa, I’ve made a good motto for undertakers to put into the shop windows.”
“What is it, my son?”
“Why, this,” explained the youngster: “You kick the bucket; we do the rest.”

In the ensuing weeks, it appeared verbatim in at least two provincial papers. Other papers were more creative. Rather than reprint the joke, they lifted the punch line and rewrote the joke for local tastes. The Atchison Chronicle (Kansas) described it as the humorous invention of a sickly local man who had “given the undertakers business a great deal of thought.” The Milwaukee Sentinel, having printed the Sun’s version of the joke in December, republished the slogan in February as the invention of an undertaker from the nearby town of Waukesha. In mid-April, the Virginia Chronicle (Nevada) condensed the joke and transported the story to the nearby mining outpost of Candelaria:

The shop of an undertaker in Candelaria, Nev., bears the following sign: “You kick the bucket. We do the rest.”

At the time, the town was in the grip of a devastating influenza epidemic which had been widely reported in both the British and American press. This invested the joke with a dark topicality and

75 It is entirely possible that the Sun borrowed this joke from another source.
76 The Milwaukee Sentinel, 25 December 1890: 4; The Milwaukee Sentinel, 30 December 1890: 4; Yenowine’s Illustrated News, 4 January 1891: 2. It was, in all likelihood, printed in numerous other papers.
78 The Milwaukee Journal, 10 February 1891: 8.
79 Yenowine’s Illustrated News published the Candelaria-based interpretation of ‘kick the bucket’ on 19 April 1891 and attributed the joke to the Nevadan paper.
the *Chronicle’s* interpretation was reprinted verbatim in newspapers across America.\footnote{Yenowine’s Illustrated News, 19 April 1891: 5; *The Milwaukee Sentinel*, 3 May 1891: 4; *The Galveston Daily News*, 7 May 1891: 4; *The Weekly Sentinel and Wisconsin Farm Journal*, 7 May 1891: 4; *Bismarck Daily Tribune*, 24 May 1891: 3; *Boston Investigator*, 1 July 1891: 6.} Not every joke went through this pattern of circulation and re-composition, but most circulated throughout America, and were therefore mediated in various ways, before entering the next stage of their development.

(iii) Importation to Britain

When interviewed in the United States, Jerome K. Jerome quipped that “the difference between English and American humour was, roughly speaking, about ten days to a fortnight.”\footnote{The Times, 16 December 1911: 11.} It was certainly possible for American jokes to cross the Atlantic that quickly. Newspaper humour was not important or topical enough to justify the cost of transatlantic telegraphy, but by the final decades of the nineteenth century a steamship journey from Britain to America took less than a week. However, the journey of most jokes does not appear to have been that rapid. The *New York Sun’s* rendition of ‘You Kick the Bucket, We do the Rest’ appeared in *The Wrexham Advertiser* on the 21 February 1891, approximately two months after the joke was picked up by the American press. This delay roughly mirrors that of two others jokes from the same column which also circulated in the American provincial press in early January.\footnote{*The Milwaukee Sentinel*, 6 January 1891: 6; *Daily Evening Bulletin* (San Francisco), 16 January, 1891: 4.} However, other jokes in the same column had begun circulating in the American press several months earlier.\footnote{*The Daily Inter Ocean*, 29 November 1890: 2; *The Milwaukee Sentinel*, 20 November 1890: 1; *Rocky Mountain News*, 4 September 1890: 9.} There was, it would seem, no standard transition time between the British and American press, though jokes which crossed the Atlantic in under a month were extremely rare.

Nor is it possible to discern precisely how this importation process took place. There are three main possibilities. Firstly, the jokes may have been collected by a single, high profile
newspaper or magazine, which would then act as a source for smaller publications. However, provincial newspapers in Britain might have acquired American periodicals and then picked out their own jokes. In either case, the selection of jokes would have fallen under the remit of the ‘exchange editors’ discussed in Chapter One. It was the responsibility of these individuals to read through piles of newspapers and periodicals from across the English-speaking world and pick out content which could be reused or commented upon in their own papers. In his 1908 guide to *Practical Journalism*, Edwin L. Shuman observed that the selection of jokes and other pieces of interesting miscellany was an important part of the exchange editor’s job. However, it is also possible that the jokes were collected and distributed by a third party or syndication company. In her influential survey of the Victorian press, Lucy Brown suggests that jokes and other magazine features were distributed to popular Sunday newspapers from a “central source”. However, she offers no further details as to what this source might have been. Other scholarship is equally vague; the history of fiction syndication by companies such as Tillotson’s has been well mapped, but the distribution of other content remains largely unexplored. Whilst it remains a possibility, there is no evidence to confirm the centralised distribution of American jokes, even in specialist trade directories devoted to the newspaper industry. Newspapers that published dedicated columns of American jokes simultaneously did not print identical sets of jokes. Moreover, as one American joke writer complained, it seems unlikely that an editor would choose to pay for something that he could obtain freely with a deft snip of his shears.

(iv) British Circulation

Once they had been imported into Britain, successful jokes soon began to circulate around other newspapers and magazines. The *New York Sun*’s version of the ‘kick the bucket’ joke struggled to

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86 “No English editor ever thinks of buying American jokes so long as he can clip them out of American papers” he argues in an article published in *The Fourth Estate* on 19 November 1896. For a summary of the argument, see: *Glasgow Herald*, 12 December 1896: 9.
take off in Britain; only one newspaper (in our digitised collections) chose to print it. However, the Candelaria adaptation appeared in a number of publications. The Leicester Mercury, for example, included it in its ‘varieties’ column on 27 June.87 On the 11 July, it was included in Horse and Hound’s regular roundup of ‘Town and Country Gossip’.88 Two weeks later, it was printed in The Lancaster Gazette under the heading ‘Wit and Humour’.89 It continued to travel around the country for several years, appearing in The Sheffield and Rotherham Independent in May 1892, in Pick-Me-Up in January 1894, and in the Aberdeen Weekly Journal the following March.90 Again, it is difficult to discern whether specific publications played important roles in circulating these jokes. Publication in a major metropolitan periodical certainly increased the visibility of a joke, but this sometimes happened long after the joke had already done the rounds in the provincial press. Indeed, it is possible that local newspapers may have fed jokes to their London rivals. As the leading periodical in its field, one would expect Tit-Bits to be a key player in the importation of American jokes. However, to quote just one example, a gag about a tramp who served during the American Civil War (as a waiter in a Canadian restaurant) appeared in two provincial papers several months before it was picked up by Newnes’ publication.91 These conclusions support Andrew Hobbs’ thesis that the provincial press did not play second fiddle to metropolitan newspapers, but formed an effective distribution system of their own which often obtained and circulated material faster than London rivals. 92 By maintaining the channels through which American jokes were imported and distributed, provincial weeklies played a leading role in shaping British consumption of American popular culture.

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88 Horse and Hound, 11 July 1891: 3.
90 Sheffield and Rotherham Independent, 4 May 1892: 4; Pick-Me-Up, 13 January 1894: 3; Aberdeen Weekly Journal, 14 March 1894: 2.
92 Andrew Hobbs, “Reading the Local Paper”.
Retelling

The short, zesty paragraphs of the American humour column were ideally suited to making the leap into other forms of print and oral culture. John A. Hobson, a British economist, newspaper editor, and social theorist, argued that:

Quiet or effervescent, quick-firing or meandering, [American humour] belongs properly to talk, and not to written speech... In the give-and-take of a merry conversation, such sayings are good enough; they may even pass by word of mouth into the stock of current jests.  

Certainly, it seems unlikely that these jokes were consumed in silence and then forgotten. In all probability, they were read aloud at breakfast tables or by family members around the fireside and then retold at work, in pubs, or on the omnibus. This oral second life enjoyed by American jokes is frustratingly inaccessible. We do not know which jokes made newspaper readers laugh, which ones they shared with their friends, or which ones were committed to memory.

There is, however, conclusive evidence that at least one American joke was remembered and retold. On Monday 14 July 1891, a meeting of the London Liberal and Radical Union was held at St. Saviour’s Hall, Battersea. Harry Levy-Lawson, M.P. for St. Pancras West, began a speech by drawing attention to the importance of organising the forces of the Liberal party in London. After offering his thoughts on a number of pressing local issues, he concluded his address with a joke.

“In a mining village in America”, he explained:

there was once an epidemic of pneumonia, which killed many people. A local undertaker had on his window the following advertisement: “You kick the bucket, and I’ll do the rest.” That is what the Liberal party would say to the Conservative Government. (Laughter and cheers).

Two and a half years later, long after the joke had ceased to circulate in British newspapers, the Conservative candidate for Flintshire, North Wales, ended his own speech by urging his party

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(now in opposition) to “adopt, with regard to the Government, the sign of an American undertaker – “You kick the bucket; we do the rest.” Several years later, the joke was still being mentioned by James Fullarton Muirhead as a classic example of Yankee humour.

This represents a rare example of a joke which can be tracked through all five stages of its lifecycle. It was written by a contributor to the New York Sun, refined by provincial American newspapers, imported and then circulated by the British press, and finally ended up as a jest used by at least two very different British politicians. Crucially, it demonstrates how the final three stages of the process were driven by British rather than American agency. The joke was crafted by American hands, but the crucial decisions to import, reprint, and repurpose it were made in Britain. Exchange editors, working their way through piles of foreign and domestic periodicals, picked it out as something worth reprinting. Politicians, who either read the joke or encountered it via oral forms of transmission, creatively repackaged it into a crowd-pleasing end to a public speech.

The role of British mediation at key stages of this process is significant. As Chapter One argues, critics of mass culture – most notably the Frankfurt school – have viewed commercially produced American popular culture with a jaundiced eye. They argue that a ‘commodification’ of culture, beginning in the late-nineteenth century, led to a situation in which ‘authentic’ forms of cultural expression were replaced by standardised cultural products. In Britain’s case, locally distinctive forms of popular culture were supposedly swamped by “degenerate, inauthentic, homogeneous, North American” imports. The consumption of these products, it is argued, served profit-driven producers who manufactured ‘false’ desire with the use of advertising and

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95 Cheshire Observer, 30 December 1893: 2; The Wrexham Advertiser, 30 December 1893: 7.
96 James Fullarton Muirhead, America: The Land of Contrasts: 134.
marketing strategies. As Hugh Mackay summarises, this interpretation of modern popular culture sees consumers as having a fundamentally passive role; they are portrayed as “manipulated, mindless dupes, rather than as active and creative beings.”99 The processes underpinning the importation, circulation, and consumption of American newspaper humour casts significant doubt on this interpretation. As the next section of this chapter demonstrates, American jokes were not forced on a passive British public by profit-driven American producers, but were imported into the country in response to an authentic popular desire.

The Consumption of American Newspaper Humour

Previous sections of this chapter have tracked the emergence of American humour as a distinctive journalistic genre and explored the processes which mediated and shaped the transatlantic joke market. All of this leads us to one fundamental question: why did American jokes occupy such a pervasive presence in late-Victorian newspapers? Firstly, it is important to stress that the pervasiveness of American jokes in Victorian print culture is not of itself conclusive evidence of their popularity. The historiography of ‘popular imperialism’ offers a cautionary tale. An initial wave of scholarship highlighted the presence of images of Empire in late-Victorian popular culture and presented this as evidence of a widespread and vibrant cultural of ‘popular imperialism’.100 However, subsequent scholars like Bernard Porter have presented evidence which suggests that the British public were relatively indifferent towards Empire.101 The idea of an all-consuming, monolithic ‘imperial culture’, in other words, may be readable in advertisements and boys’ adventure stories, but was not necessarily part of everyday life, although one has to say that advertisements and adventure stories were as much a part of everyday life as anything else. By

the same token, the enduring presence of American jokes in popular newspapers may not at first glance be sufficient evidence to prove that the British public had an insatiable appetite for them, or that they made a significant impact upon their imagination. In order to make this case – and it is a case worth making – it is necessary to work through and problematize alternative explanations.

Firstly, it could be argued that American jokes functioned primarily as newspaper fillers. They came in a variety of shapes and sizes – single lines, short paragraphs, longer anecdotes – and were well suited to plugging gaps between a paper’s primary content. Jokes were certainly used in this fashion by American editors. The editor of the Milwaukee Sentinel, for example, casually scattered jokes throughout the paper wherever a few inches of space needed to be filled. This tactic was not unique to America; Tit-Bits and other British periodicals adopted a similar strategy. However, whilst American jokes were cheap and flexible, so were clippings from the British comic press. Extracts from these papers also appeared regularly in British newspapers – copyright, as applied to newspapers, was uncertain and unevenly applied throughout the nineteenth century and proved no obstacle to the reprinting of British content.102 This begs the question: if all that editors wanted was a source of free filler, why go to the trouble of seeking out American jokes when an abundance of other material was closer at hand?

Furthermore, an examination of how American jokes were packaged by British newspaper editors indicates that they were not treated as cheap fillers. Indeed, they enjoyed a higher status in British newspapers than in many American publications. As the second section of this chapter explored, during the final quarter of the nineteenth century British editors began to gather their American jokes into dedicated columns with visible crossheads. This is significant, for it indicates an elevation in status from disposable filler to a regular, and more conspicuous, weekly feature. However, it is important to stress that not all features enjoyed the same prestige; some were

102 Graham Law, ‘Copyright’: 143.
central to a paper’s identity whilst others were less prized. We can gain a valuable insight into the status of American humour columns by examining their positioning on the page. This varied between newspapers, but most editors followed one of two strategies. Some, such as the *Newcastle Weekly Courant* printed American jokes as a secondary feature. As Fig 3.1 shows, the columns were typically placed in the bottom half of the page, underneath serialised fiction and alongside other comic clippings and miscellany. Whilst this might suggest that the paper did not hold American humour in the highest regard, it nevertheless devoted approximately half a column to the jokes each week and printed them on the same page as other popular magazine features. In fact, throughout the final years of the column’s run, it appeared in the same place each week – halfway down the final column of page 2. The front cover was devoted to adverts, so this was the first page of content in the newspaper. It was filled with a classic mix of miscellaneous tit-bits and magazine features. This was a deliberate strategy by the paper’s editor; a prioritising of entertaining content above more sober features. During the 1890s, a regular reader of the *Courant*, or a prospective customer flicking through the paper at a train station bookstall, would have encountered American jokes before local or national news.

Fig 3.1 *Newcastle Weekly Courant*, 2 February 1895 & 9 May 1891
Other papers, such as the *Hampshire Telegraph*, devoted more space to American jokes. As Fig 3.2 indicates, they were regularly given an entire column. This is significant not just for the amount of space allocated, but because it places the column’s crosshead at the top of the page. This was prime newspaper real estate. When browsing through a paper, it is the titles sitting at the head of each column that are most conspicuous. They are designed to draw the attention of a reader and were typically reserved for a paper’s key, recurring, and most-saleable features.

*Fig 3.2 Hampshire Telegraph, 26 July 1884 & 24 January 1891.*

Such evidence strongly suggests that many British editors treated American humour as more than simply a cheap filler. Crucially, these editorial decisions provide valuable insights into the popularity of American jokes with newspaper audiences. As chapter one explores, the editors of late-Victorian popular newspapers operated in an extraordinarily competitive marketplace.
Even in provincial towns, several local papers vied for public attention. As a result, their survival was dependent upon identifying and meeting popular taste. This is not to suggest that every component of a weekly newspaper mirrored public tastes and opinions. However, it is inconceivable that so many editors would have carried columns of American humour for years at a time if they had not met the approval of readers. The selection of jokes was a carefully orchestrated process. Edward Raymond Thompson, who worked as a journalist in London in the 1890s, offers an insight into how editors chose their material. His description of the process is worth quoting at length,

[New Journalism] treated a joke as a very serious thing, in which it was right – a joke is a very serious thing. It decided against certain classes of jokes. There must not be jokes about Nonconformists; many advertising agents are Nonconformists... There must not be ‘unpleasant’ jokes; otherwise the babies’ food and the condensed milks will not come into the advertising columns. Finally, by a process of exhaustion, the right kinds of jokes are reached, and by due experiment (prize competitions and the like) conducted with all the seriousness of a Home Office analysis, it is found which particular kind of joke brings the greatest happiness to the greatest number. This discovery made, the joke is made the subject of mass production, and vast stocks are poured out until the bookstall agents recommend a change.

Thompson’s account reveals the complex processes through which the content of a popular newspaper was shaped in response to a number of external influences. He highlights the influence of advertisers and booksellers, but, crucially, also reveals a clear dialogue between a newspaper and its readers.

The active role played by Victorian readers in shaping the content of their newspapers can be better analysed and understood with reference to theoretical models of consumption developed by studies of contemporary popular culture. In recent decades, social scientists and cultural theorist have developed approaches to consumption which have increasingly challenged the Frankfurt school’s traditional critique of mass culture. Broadly speaking, consumers are no longer seen as simply the passive victims of capitalism. Instead, consumption is now understood

103 The 1891 census lists Thompson as a ‘newspaper reporter’.
as a potentially creative activity which can play a key role in the development and articulation of identity. One of the most interesting concepts to emerge from these debates is that of *bricolage*; a process through which texts and other cultural artefacts are appropriated and reused by consumers. The concept offers a useful way to analyse the new conditions of newspaper production and consumption that emerged during the last half of the nineteenth century. The ‘exchange editor’ with his shears, scanned piles of newspapers and selected particular jokes which were then re-assembled into joke columns. This process of mediation took place several times, as jokes journeyed from one newspaper to another, and finally from the US to Britain. Throughout this process, the interactive, ‘Tit-Bit’ format adopted by many newspapers encouraged readers to become active players in this collective game of *bricolage*. Readers scanned newspapers and magazines and submitted tit-bits to other papers in order to win competitions or simply to see their names in print. Those who did not contribute material were not left out; the act of buying a newspaper was itself a form of feedback. Booksellers and newsagents relayed regular circulation figures to editors. These reader response mechanisms gave editors and journalists valuable insight into what styles and themes were popular, and helped shape the next round of jokes. This was a constant, cyclical process. Over time, the tastes and identities of readers were gradually inscribed into the newspaper. Tracking these multiple layers of *bricolage* is important at two key levels. Firstly, it demonstrates how newspapers were particularly responsive to readers’ tastes and shaped their content accordingly. Secondly, it shows that many readers were not simply passive consumers of mass-produced, standardised cultural texts, but were involved in what can be described as active, creative and critical consumption. This is not to suggest that readers identified with every article in their chosen paper; there were, undoubtedly, some readers who skipped past columns of American jokes in search of gardening advice or juicy murders. However

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the pervasive presence of American jokes in this intensely competitive market points to an authentic popular demand articulated, and continuously reinforced, by readers.

Interpreting the popularity of American jokes leads us into the uncertain realm of reader response. Attempting to discover precisely why the British public enjoyed consuming American jokes is not a straightforward task. Unlike anthropologists, who have the luxury of being able to conduct research in the field, historians of Victorian culture cannot access popular audiences directly. This presents a fundamental problem. Jonathan Rose’s argument that “no book can play any meaningful role in history until somebody reads it, and we cannot know what influence a given book has unless we can somehow enter the minds of its readers” has considerable force; his attempts to write a “history of audiences” by analysing working-class diaries, autobiographies and other forms of personal testimony have produced new insights into what he terms the ‘intellectual life’ of the British working classes.106 However, whilst the autobiographies of left wing autodidacts provide insights into how readers responded to Marx’s Capital, it is not possible to use these sources for a study of American newspaper jokes. Put simply, the evidence does not exist. The Reading Experience Database – arguably the best resource for identifying reader responses – has no entry on American jokes, and has only a handful of references to Mark Twain. Even if commentary on these sources surfaces somewhere within a working-class diary, we cannot know how representative its author was of wider public opinion. Moreover, the term ‘American Humour’ encompasses a range of different jokes which may have provoked contrasting responses. A light-hearted exchange between a husband and wife, for example, may have prompted a very different response to a joke about a mischievous ‘negro’ character. We are left asking an impossible question; how did an almost limitless number of possible readers respond to thousands of different jokes? Identifying dominant responses to typical jokes, or discussing the

broader concept of American humour, presents a partial solution but is fraught with shortcomings. How do we determine what was ‘typical’? How do we prove what was ‘dominant’?

To leave the issue unexplored, however, is equally unsatisfactory. If we are to understand the presence of American jokes in late-Victorian culture it is essential to try and make sense of the factors which drove and informed their consumption. Vic Gatrell ventures a potential solution. “The historian of mentalities”, he argues, “looks not for an impossibly ‘averaged’ opinion in this or that age, but for what was thinkable and doable, regardless of its assumed normative status or the imagined percentages of people involved.” Gatrell explores these ‘mentalities’ through an examination of humorous engravings supplemented by contemporary commentary. The final section of this chapter adopts a similar approach. It does not seek to offer a definitive answer to the question “how and why were American jokes consumed in late-Victorian Britain?” For, of course, no such answer exists. Like any other cultural texts, American jokes were consumed by different people in different ways, at different times. Rather, it identifies a range of possible responses – things which were ‘thinkable and doable.’ It accesses these ‘mentalities’ through a combination of contemporary commentary, an analysis of the strategies used by editors to sell American humour, and a reading of the jokes themselves. This analysis is structured around a debate on the power and meaning of laughter.

The Laughter of Good Fellowship

Like most cultural forms, jokes have a range of purposes and functions. However, it is important not to lose sight of their core function – they are primarily designed to be funny. Their success is heavily dependent upon their ability to produce a laugh; a joke may have many admirable qualities, but if it fails as a piece of humour then it is unlikely to survive. It is relatively safe to conclude, therefore, that imported American newspaper jokes were popular because they made

107 Vic Gatrell, City of Laughter: 49. My italics.
British readers laugh. This is not to suggest that each joke sent every reader into spasms of delight. Some, such as the undertaker gag, clearly received a hearty response, whilst others may have prompted a weaker smile or, in some cases, stony-faced silence. Laughter, though, was nevertheless central to their function and success. In order to understand the place of these jokes in late-Victorian popular culture – and, crucially, to make sense of how and why they were consumed – it is essential to unpack the source and the target of their humour.

As Donna Goldstein observes, a range of theorists and cultural historians have argued that humour is underpinned by an ‘essential aggressiveness’. Peter Gay, for example, has explored what he terms the ‘bite of wit’; an approach which sees humour “as – in large part – an act of aggression.” Similarly, both Goldstein and James Scott have argued that humour is one of the ‘weapons of the weak’; a way for dominated groups to resist and attack the upper classes. The aggressive power of humour is also open to other groups; as Goldstein further reminds us, laughter can fall within the “arsenal of the powerful.” What emerges from this scholarship is the idea that the performance of a joke creates both a victim and an aggressor. This interpretation is not without its merits. Presenting, or recognising, something as ridiculous can be read as a hostile act; a way to assert, or manufacture, a sense of superiority over that which is being mocked. Indeed, it is possible to identify strands within British popular culture which certainly offered opportunities to laugh at America. In Punch, an ‘American joke’ was usually a British-authored jibe at American manners and culture. In these gags, ‘Brother Jonathan’ was typically presented as a vulgar, brutish, nationalistic, dim-witted, Yankee who spoke in broken slang and worshipped the ‘almighty dollar’. When Punch printed gags featuring America, it was

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110 Donna Goldstein, Laughter Out of Place: 7; James C. Scott, Domination and the Arts of Resistance.
111 Donna Goldstein, Laughter Out of Place: 7.
perfectly clear that the people and customs of the United States were the butt of the joke. *Punch*, moreover, was not the only Victorian voice to denigrate America through laughter; its representations of Americans drew upon a long tradition of exaggerated, and rather unflattering, ‘stage Yankees’ in British theatres.\(^{113}\) In both cases, British audiences were encouraged to laugh at America, either with aggression or condescension. In the process, the British way of life was implicitly celebrated as superior. Imported American newspaper humour occupied the same cultural landscape as these uncomplimentary British jests and its consumption may have been shaped, to some extent, by similar anti-American sentiments.

However, this interpretation is problematic. It is impossible to escape the fact that these jokes were written, printed, and read, at least in the first instance, by Americans. With the exception of the *Detroit Free Press* – which managed to sell more copies in the UK than America and may, therefore, have had one eye on British readers – American newspaper jokes were produced for a domestic market.\(^{114}\) When British newspapers clipped their favourite gags from the pages of the American press, no money changed hands. These humourists and their editors had nothing to gain by courting a British audience or denigrating America for the benefit of British readers. In fact, they had far more to gain from asserting American superiority and often delighted in making fun of bumbling English tourists or puncturing the bloated pretensions of British culture.\(^{115}\) Jokes occasionally played upon regional rivalries or made fun of certain American character types, but in their original form they did not constitute an attack on the American way of life.

This is not to suggest that British readers consumed imported American jokes in exactly the same way as their original audience. The effect of a joke is not determined solely by its


\(^{115}\) Unsurprisingly, few of these anti-English jests were reproduced in the British press.
author, but by the context of its consumption. Whilst most American jokes were reproduced word for word in the British press, they were organised and presented in important new ways. British editors exerted their influence by selecting jokes, omitting others, and then deciding how to package them. Jokes were gathered together in new combinations (gags clipped from the *Detroit Free Press* might rub shoulders with jests found in New York’s *Puck*), and branded as American imports, with all of the cultural connotations this implied. They were, moreover, read by a British audience whose consumption was informed and shaped by a new social, cultural, and political context. Whilst the function of the punch-lines remained largely intact, the layers of meaning embedded in these joke were almost certainly different. It is likely, therefore, that they were read in different ways and enjoyed for different reasons on each side of the Atlantic.

This process of transatlantic translation may have opened the door to aggressive, anti-American laughter. Take the following example:

Chicago Woman: How much do you charge for securing a divorce?
Chicago Lawyer: One hundred dollars, ma’am, or six for 500dols.\(^{116}\)

In New York, the consumption of this gag would have been informed by a number of specific contextual factors, including: a long-standing rivalry between New York and Chicago; knowledge of Chicago’s notoriously relaxed divorce laws; widely circulating caricatures of Chicagoan femininity; similarly unflattering conceptions about the city’s relentless pursuit of money; and an awareness of broader cultural differences between the east coast and the mid-west. Consumed in this specific context, *regional* difference sits at the heart of the joke. Chicago’s loose morals are the target of ridicule, whilst those of New York are implicitly established as the norm. The nuances of this response are not hardwired into the core text of the joke, but sparked by the connotations of a keyword (‘Chicago’) and informed by the assumptions, experiences, and identity of a specific consumer.

\(^{116}\) *Newcastle Weekly Courant*, 6 June 1891: 3.
In Britain, consumption of the same joke was informed by new contextual factors. American representations of Chicago appeared regularly in British newspapers – not least in humour columns and, as a result, it is possible that some readers were sufficiently familiar with US life and culture to decipher the joke in an American fashion; to understand the underlying message that life in Chicago was different from life in New York, Washington, or Boston. However, such a response is learned rather than instinctive. It does not measure unexpected/transgressive behaviour against the reader’s own normative baseline (British culture), but requires them to make reference to an alternative (New York). For British readers, a more instinctive response would be to locate the joke within an international framework; to view ‘Chicago’ as shorthand for ‘America’. This subtle shift in perspective potentially transforms the United States into the butt of its own joke. A liberal attitude to divorce and a distasteful appetite for money become American characteristics, set against a more respectable British norm. This transformation did not apply solely to jokes based on regional rivalries. Similar opportunities for Anglo-American comparison were created each time a joke was branded ‘American’. Any gag printed under a heading such as ‘Yankee Snacks’ implicitly invited British readers to compare American manners, characters, and culture to their own. Moreover, it encouraged them to judge peculiar American behaviour against British conceptions of normality and to find the disparity amusing. Viewed in this context, laughing at imported American humour may still be interpreted as an aggressive or condescending act; a process through which America was denigrated and Britain’s sense of social and cultural superiority reinforced.

However, an analysis of contemporary commentary reveals little evidence of this aggressive, self-congratulatory laughter. In fact, Victorian commentators chiefly explained their appetite for American jokes with reference to a different kind of laughter; one which was centred on the demonstration of approval rather than aggression. The Times, often an out-spoken critic of American culture, ended a review of a visiting American circus troupe with the following observation:
As for the clowns, their humour is greatly of the talkative kind, and is enriched by an unmistakable Yankee accent. The American jokes excite English laughter, and as laughter is generally a sign of good fellowship, Messrs. Pentland, Myers, Ferdinand, and Footet may be regarded as symbols of international cordiality.\(^{117}\)

This points to an alternative reading of imported American humour, in which laughter can be interpreted as an expression of pleasure and a signal of approval bestowed upon the joke teller. Indeed, in order to make sense of the place of American humour in late-Victorian popular culture, it is necessary to look beyond theories which prioritise aggression and unpack this so-called ‘laughter of good fellowship’ in more detail.

Daniel Wickberg’s The Sense of Humour offers a useful point of entry. He argues that the second half of the nineteenth century was a critical period in the emergence of a ‘sense of humour’ as a unique and desirable personality trait. Until the Victorian period, laughter was primarily interpreted as an unmediated physical reaction to ugly, inferior, or deformed things – things that were unlike the person laughing. Arguably the most prominent exponent of this so-called ‘superiority theory’ was Thomas Hobbes. “Sudden glory”, he observed, “is the passion which maketh those grimaces called LAUGHTER; and is caused by... the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves.”\(^{118}\)

However, by the nineteenth century this interpretation of humour had been challenged by a range of thinkers who sought to locate the origins of laughter in the juxtaposition of incongruous elements or circumstances. This ‘incongruity theory’ defused laughter’s “harmful and antipathetic elements” by making it “a result of abstract relations in the mind, [thereby] turning ridicule into a victimless game.”\(^{119}\) Wickberg argues that, by the nineteenth century, humour had been refashioned and incorporated into a new middle-class culture of benevolence and sympathy. This

\(^{117}\) The Times, 11 November 1858: 5. My italics.

\(^{118}\) Thomas Hobbes, Leviathan, (1651). The ‘superiority theory’ can be traced back as far as Plato and Aristotle, who both emphasized the aggressive nature of humour.

new conception of humour centred on a form of “nonderisive laughter” which encouraged one to laugh with rather than at another person or object, and also to laugh at oneself. Crucially, he links this new cultural sensibility to the emergence of the ‘sense of humour’ as a recognised personality trait. The phrase, he argues, first emerged in the 1840s. By the 1870s it was recognised as a valued personal attribute. At the close of the century it was widely acknowledged as an “essential component of a complete person.”

Wickberg’s thesis is not without its faults. He draws heavily on the work of scholars, psychologists, and essayists at the expense of more popular conceptions of humour. Moreover, his focus on sympathetic laughter clouds the fact that derisive forms of humour such as wit, satire, and ethnic humour were neither extinguished nor shunned by the Victorian middle-class. Nevertheless, his study makes two important contributions to this thesis. Firstly, he comprehensively maps out an alternative to aggressive and condescending forms of laughter and locates evidence of its presence in nineteenth-century British culture. It is possible, in other words, that the consumption of imported American jokes may have been shaped by a sympathetic as well as an aggressive attitude towards the United States. Secondly, he establishes the idea that a ‘sense of humour’ – an ability to invent, tell, and perceive a joke – was widely celebrated as a desirable personality trait during the late-Victorian period. This particular conclusion is reinforced by new ‘culturomic’ evidence generated using digital newspaper archives and Google Book’s Ngram Viewer. Fig 3.3, for example, uses data mined from Google Books to track how the term ‘sense of humour’ gained currency in wider Victorian culture during the second half of the nineteenth century – the resulting pattern broadly mirrors the chronology set out by Wickberg. The rise of this cultural sensibility suggests that the success of imported American gags may have encouraged British audiences to regard the United States in a positive light as a skilful teller of jokes – a country with a good ‘sense of humour’.

120 Daniel Wickberg, The Senses of humour, blurb.
121 For a discussion of culturomics, see: Jean-Baptiste Michel, et all ‘Quantitative Analysis of Culture Using Millions of Digitized Books’.
An examination of contemporary commentary and editorial strategies provides compelling evidence of this ‘laughter of good fellowship’. When British commentators attempted to account for the popularity of imported American gags, they reserved particular praise for the country’s distinctive sense of humour. Attempts to dissect its defining features invariably began by pointing out its fondness for exaggeration. “When we come to consider the characteristics of the humour which is purely Yankee”, observed The Globe, “we find that one of the most conspicuous of them is the spirit of exaggeration and accumulation which informs it.”\textsuperscript{122}

Indeed, the “extravagant exaggeration” of American humour was so widely recognised in Britain that Muirhead was reluctant to furnish his discussion of the topic with an example. “To the ordinary observer”, he argued, “[this] has... always been its salient feature; and stock examples will occur to everyone.”\textsuperscript{123}

This spirit of exaggeration manifested itself in two significant ways. Firstly, a number of American jokes derived humour from the exaggerated ‘tall-talk’ of a character. “Talk of bulls!” boasted one ‘far-Westerner’, “I knew an ox so fat, that his shadow stuck to the ground for an hour after he was gone!” Much like the Chicago divorce lawyer joke, this particular jest drew upon regional stereotypes and encouraged a comparison between the ‘normal’ East, where the joke...
was published, and the peculiar behaviour of Westerners. In the years following the declaration of
independence, boastfulness became widely recognised in Britain as an archetypal American trait.
Patriotic citizens of the new republic confidently proclaimed the superiority of American life and
culture over a ‘decaying’ and ‘corrupt’ old world, so imported ‘tall-talk’ jokes may have been
popular in Britain, at least in part, because they poked fun at this American failing. Towards the
end of the century, as the United States posed an increasingly potent cultural and economic
challenge to Britain, this laughter may also have stemmed from British anxieties; a way to diffuse
the real power of America by exposing its growing confidence as little more than hot air.
However, more sympathetic forms of laughter were equally plausible. Exaggeration was also part
of the characteristic voice of the American narrator. One joke, for example, related the story of a
woman who only became aware of a tornado when she looked up from her gardening and “saw
the air black with her intimate friends.” 124 In this case, humour is derived from the incongruous
situation conjured by the skill of the joke-teller and not from mocking the transparent boasting of
a character. Exaggeration, in other words, is the source of the humour but not its target. In this
sense, America’s perceived propensity for ‘tall-talk’ was regarded as a virtue as well as a flaw – an
entertaining component of their distinctive character and ‘sense of humour’.

The second key quality attributed to American humour by British commentators was its
irreverence. American humourists were able to transgress many of the boundaries of taste and
respectability that restricted British humourists. “When a correspondent asks [an American
humourist] if... eating fish is good for the brain,” The Globe pointed out:

he says yes, and suggests that that inquirer would do well to consume a good-sized
whale... Elsewhere, when he desires to emphasise the force of an attack of vomiting, he
declares that he “believes he threw up his immortal soul... This would not be tolerated in
an English writer.” 125

124 James Fullarton Muirhead, The Land of Contrasts: 137.
Despite some British observers denouncing the worst excesses of this freedom, most seem to have found the playfully risqué (but rarely repulsive) irreverence of American humourists amusing and exciting. In fact, The Globe described Americans’ lack of inhibition as “the principle source of Yankee fun;” “Yankee humourists”, it argued, “may congratulate themselves... on living in a community where the unconventional does not startle... American writers know that they are not hampered by English canons of good taste, and the result is a daring boldness on which... our own jesters could not safely venture.”

This irreverence manifested itself most often in a lack of respect for authority. “American humour has no reverence for those in high position,” observed Muirhead, “an American will say of his chief executive, 'Yes, the President has a great deal of taste – and all of it bad.'” They were also happy to make light of religion and, particularly, “the awful mystery of death”. “Nothing is sacred to a Yankee” observed the Ipswich Journal after printing the following ‘droll’ epitaph taken from a child’s grave in Wisconsin:

A little cough,
It took him off;
And a little coffin,
We took him off in.

The paper’s objection to this vein of American humour is interesting. Not only did it introduce this American joke, unprovoked, into a column about the ‘Graveyards of Suffolk’, but also included similar tombstone-gags in its own column of imported American humour. In 1886, for example, it carried the following quip supposedly lifted from cemetery in Colorado: “He was young, he was fair/ But the Injuns raised his hair.” This kind of response highlights the complex and often contradictory nature of wider British responses to American culture. The paper ostensibly chastises America for its unwillingness to uphold British codes of respectability, but

130 Ipswich Journal, 23 July 1886, p. 6.
provides audiences with entertaining examples of its supposed transgressions. America is condemned and then enjoyed, almost in the same breath.

The popularity of these jokes suggests that British audiences found American irreverence amusing and liberating. However, the underlying dynamics of this laughter are once again open to interpretation. On the one hand, laughing at transgressive American behaviour might be read as a sign of enjoyment and, perhaps, even approval. In this context, the consumption of American jokes may have been an act of mild transgression; a way to playfully deconstruct established British codes and push at the boundaries of respectability. However, much like critiques of Bakhtin’s carnivalesque, it is possible to dismiss this as only a temporary form of transgression – one which could always be contained and explained away as ‘American’. Here, in other words, was a controlled space in which transgression was sanctioned and order restored at the turn of a page. Such an interpretation leads to the conclusion that imported American jokes made no significant impact on British culture; that they existed only as a reminder of what was not British. However, a closer look at late-Victorian popular culture suggests that this was not the case. The American humour column was not a hermetically sealed space, incapable of ‘contaminating’ the culture that surrounded it. As John S. Batts has argued, American humourists had a significant impact on the development of a new school of British humour, led most notably by Jerome K. Jerome.131 Moreover, as Chapter Four later explores, jokes were a key player in the importation, circulation, and assimilation of ‘racy’ American slang.

The final characteristic of American humour identified by British commentators was the “dry suggestiveness” with which it set up and delivered its punchlines. This effect was typically produced by the “sharp antithesis” between a deadpan delivery and the irreverent exaggeration outlined above. This style of humour was perfected by Artemus Ward and Mark Twain who

presented themselves to British audiences as serious lecturers unaware of their own jokes. “Both writers,” observed Robert Ford, “began in a serious – or apparently serious – mood, and produced [their] comic effects – or the best of them – by giving the most ludicrous and unexpected turns to [their] sentences.”  

132 *The Graphic*, recalling the performances of Ward several years after his death, described the effect of this delivery as being akin to “a Quaker suddenly flinging a cracker at you – that was the character of the surprise, and it always startled and delighted one.”

Similar strategies were employed by newspaper humourists, who presented humorous ideas and situations in a dry, factual manner – often in the form of a news bulletin. One particularly macabre example ran: “Mrs. William Hankins lighted her fire with coal oil on February 23. Her clothes fit the present Mrs. Hankins to a T.”

134 The difference between genuine news reports and jokes was often difficult for British editors to determine. In 1896, for example, the *Leicester Chronicle* received a New York telegram about a woman who had been “swept off her feet [by a storm], carried a quarter of a mile, and dropped into the cemetery.” It was unsure whether to treat the story as fact or as a specimen of “grim American humour”.

135 Many American jokes met a similar fate and were misdirected to columns of miscellaneous news.

The supposed difficulties experienced by British audiences in deciphering American jokes were highlighted by a number of commentators. “There is a wide difference between the humour of the Englishman and the humour of the American”, observed Muirhead:

John Bull’s downrightness appears in his jests also. His jokes must be unmistakable; he wants none of your quips masquerading as serious observations. A mere twinkle of the eye is not for him a sufficient illumination between the serious and the comic... He will welcome a joke as hospitably as a visitor, if only the credentials of the one as of the other are unimpeachable. Now the American does not wish his joke underlined like an urgent parliamentary whip. He wants something left to his imagination; he wants to be tickled by the feeling that it requires a keen eye to see the point; he may, in a word, like his champagne sweet, but he wants his humour dry.

133 *The Graphic*, 1 April 1871
Interestingly, these comments suggest that the difficulties British audiences had in recognising American jokes were not blamed on the sharpness of the joke, but the bluntness of the audience. Whilst Muirhead was quick to champion the greats of British humour, he nevertheless reached the conclusion that the typical American citizen—the ‘man on the cars’—had a more developed sense of humour than his English equivalent.

In reality, this ostensible disparity between the British and American sense of humour cannot have been large. The fact that American humour was printed in so many of the country’s bestselling newspapers suggests that British audiences did not encounter serious difficulties in consuming it. Nevertheless, they were presented with something stylistically different to British jokes—something fresh. Walter Nash argues that all jokes have “a characteristic design, presentation, or verbal packaging, by virtue of which the humorous intention is indicated and recognised.”¹³⁷ In other words, “jokes are announced... through the form in which they are presented; the listener or reader recognises a convention, realises that he has met something like this before, [and] understands that his wits are being keyed and preconditioned” to decipher a particular form of humour.¹³⁸ We all know, for example, what to expect and how to reply when somebody says ‘knock knock.’ American humour required British readers to adjust to a new and unfamiliar rhythm, presentation and style of delivery. In some cases, this may have acted as an obstacle to its success. However, the enduring popularity of American humour suggests that the majority of British readers not only overcame these problems of translation, but took pleasure in mastering and consuming a new and refreshing form of humour.

Indeed, an analysis of the way in which imported jokes were packaged by British editors suggests the ‘freshness’ of American humour may well have been the key to its success. The Hampshire Telegraph, for example, ran American humour under an eclectic range of headlines where freshness and novelty were constantly foregrounded (Fig. 4): “Stars and Stripes: the freshest Yankee jokes”; “Laugh and Grow Fat: the latest Yankee humour”; “The Merry-Man: fresh

fun from the states”; “A Yankee Target: the latest shooting yarns”; “Cuts and Slashes: from current Yankee wit”; “Raw Yankee Jokes: the freshest, from many sources”; and “Breezy Yankee Bits.” Each of these columns was styling itself as the best place to find the latest and freshest jokes from the home of new and original humour; the hottest “Yankee Fire Sparks,” as another column styled itself, “fresh from fun’s foundry.” The paper’s editor clearly believed that the freshness of American humour was the key to its success. Tellingly, when British commentators later attempted to account for the decline of American humour, they highlighted the fact that it had lost its novelty – Yankee jokes, they complained, had become passé as soon as they lost the capacity to surprise.

Fig 3.4: Selected American Humour Column Headers from the Hampshire Telegraph

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140 Hampshire Telegraph and Sussex Chronicle, 2 January 1892: 9.

141 See, for example: The Licensed Victuallers’ Mirror, 21 July 1891: 1; Essex County Standard, 4 March 1893: 3.
There are a number of ways in which we might understand the place of ‘freshness’ in British responses to American newspaper jokes. Evolutionary theorist, Alistair Clarke, recently posited a universal theory of humour based upon the concept of ‘pattern recognition.’ “The brain”, he argues, “finds something amusing when it recognises a pattern that surprises it.”\(^{142}\) Whilst the evolutionary dimensions of Clarke’s theory are open to debate, his study lends scientific weight to the idea that jokes characterised by new and unfamiliar subjects and patterns are more likely to inspire laughter than well-worn gags. Put simply, the freshness of imported American jokes may well have made them funnier.

However, it is important to recognise that, when situated in a late-Victorian context, the idea of freshness was entangled within a complex web of transatlantic cultural politics. As Chapter Two of this thesis explores, the late-Victorian period saw America become increasingly associated with both the ‘thrill’ and the ‘threat’ of the new. By the 1880s and 1890s, Victorian commentators discussed America’s ascendency with an increasing air of inevitability; the future, for better or worse, was being built on the other side of the Atlantic. This new attitude to America was closely allied to British, and indeed European, anxieties surrounding the perceived threat of ‘degeneration’; a growing, fatalistic, sense that the Old World was in decline.\(^{143}\) This pessimistic contrast between American vigour and British decay manifested itself in the country’s responses to American humour. Yankee jokes, argued the Leeds Mercury, were popular with British audiences because they were:

refreshing to the jaded brain that is accustomed to wade through the flavourless, six-water-grog kind of wit of the English comic journals; where, if the laboured joke is

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dissected, it is found to be but a new corpus built upon the skeleton of an old Joe Miller.\textsuperscript{144} 

Other newspapers, such as The Globe, reached similar conclusions:

The best [English humourists] are silent now... We are almost compelled, therefore, to go to Yankee writers for the great bulk of our fun. But we go very willingly. And we go, mainly, because we find in the work of our lively cousins so much that is agreeably fresh and individual. It is, we say to ourselves, so unlike anything that we can get from our own people; it is so characteristic. It is like roaming about in a new world of quip and quiddity.\textsuperscript{145}

To suggest that British consumers abandoned home-grown humour in the final two decades of the nineteenth century is clearly an exaggeration; domestically-produced comic periodicals, music hall entertainers, and literary humourists all enjoyed popular success. Nevertheless, the idea that America had usurped Britain as the home of new and inventive forms of humour was in widespread circulation on both sides of the Atlantic.

British commentators responded to America’s superior aptitude for joke-telling in a range of contrasting ways. Some, predictably, became defensive and extolled the virtues of Punch and other leading exponents of British humour. However, most seemed willing to accept the idea and, in the words of The Globe, “went very willingly” to Yankee jesters for the “great bulk of their fun.”\textsuperscript{146} This late-Victorian celebration of American ‘newness’ is particularly significant and redolent of the age. Studies of fin-de-siècle British culture have emphasized the prevailing idea of the ‘new’ – how terms such as the ‘new woman’, the ‘new man’, the ‘new drama’, ‘new journalism’ and ‘new humour’ were constantly coined and then spun into circulation, creating their own complex cross-currents. Sometimes they were used in a derogatory and conservative fashion, and sometimes as radical critiques of what was increasingly perceived as ‘old’. British responses to the freshness of American humour were an essential part of this fin-de-siècle ‘discourse of the new’ in which anxieties and possibilities seemed equally mixed. In particular, a study of the widespread popularity of American humour alerts to the fact that these new forms of

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{144} The Leeds Mercury, 29 April 1882: 1.  
\textsuperscript{146} Clipping from The Globe published in the Belfast News-Letter, January 6th 1887: 7
\end{flushleft}
American popular culture – and, crucially, the impending ‘American future’ they represented – were not greeted solely with condescension and anxiety by Victorians, but with a sense of genuine enthusiasm.

‘Americana’

Finally, it is important to stress that American humour was capable of more than simply making British audiences laugh, or giving them a taste for something different and new. In his brief essay on the London edition of the Detroit Free Press, media historian James Stanford Bradshaw points to the possibility that these jokes may have performed other cultural work. “The paper’s speciality”, he argues:

was in American humour and other Americana. It made no attempt to ‘cover’ the news of the day or the week... It was a feature paper, designed for light reading by a mass audience. And, as such, it provided Britons, as well as other English speakers or readers, with unique insights into American life and culture. This may have been one of its more important, though unmeasurable, effects.147

Bradshaw’s insight does not apply solely to the Detroit Free Press. All forms of imported American humour were brimming with ‘Americana’, and we need to recognise them for what they were – artefacts saturated in American life and culture. Here were key vehicles for the importation of American culture and representations of American life. As a result, these gags played an important role in shaping the British public’s conceptions of what life might be like on the other side of the Atlantic.

Indeed, the ‘Americana’ of jokes may also have been an important component of their success. As previous sections of this study have demonstrated, the Victorian public had an almost inexhaustible appetite for new information about America. The commercial success of American jokes may well have been influenced by the same curiosity which drove demand for transatlantic travelogues and other descriptive accounts of Yankee life. A number of British commentators praised American humour for its ability to offer British readers an encounter with what seemed to

be an authentic slice of American life and culture. “It is not necessary,” praised The Leeds Mercury:

for these prolific American humorists to devise eccentric situations to base their jokes upon. The ordinary affairs of every-day life most admirably serve their purpose. The numerous callers at the office of a newspaper editor... – a domestic incident – a conjugal difference – a place-hunter’s pertinacity...There is an... exceedingly original aspect of ordinary things which we get from across the water.¹⁴⁸

Editors were quick to recognise this second selling point of American jokes. For example, a joke column printed in the Hampshire Telegraph & Sussex Chronicle ran under the title: ‘Yankee Vignettes: Taken from Life Over There.’¹⁴⁹ The content of the column – which had once run under the title ‘Laugh and Grow Fat: the latest Yankee humour’ – was unchanged. However, it was no longer styled as a collection of gags; the idea of humour, in fact, is completely absent from this particular rebranding. Instead, the editor aimed to attract readers by offering sketches of ‘authentic’ American life.

During the late 1880s and 1890s, the forms of American newspaper humour most commonly selected by British editors were increasingly suited to this role. ‘Tall-talk’ jokes and puns gave way to short comic sketches featuring American characters in everyday American locations. For example, one column featured: an exchange between hat salesmen; a conversation between a dramatic author and an over-ambitious amateur actress; two women gossiping over clothes, a sailor in court; two men talking about a play; a comic poem; a philanthropist trying to convince a New York millionaire to launch a religious newspaper; an exchange between a magistrate and a prisoner; a surprise encounter between a man and his cook; a disagreement between a poet and an editor; and a misunderstanding between a husband and his wife.¹⁵⁰ One joke about an ‘anarchist Sunday school’ indulged in a greater flight of fancy, but all of the other anecdotes centred on seemingly authentic everyday American situations.

¹⁴⁹Hampshire Telegraph & Sussex Chronicle, December 27th 1890: 12.
¹⁵⁰The Hampshire Telegraph and Sussex Chronicle, 27 April 1889: 12.
These jokes were steeped in Americana. Some staged encounters on famous American streets like ‘Broadway’, ‘5th Avenue’ and ‘Wall Street’. Others centred on distinctive urban locations such as ‘drugstores’, ‘dime museums’, and ‘depots’, and mobilised a new urban vocabulary of ‘sidewalks’, ‘skyscrapers’ and ‘soda-fountains’. Some offered glimpses of life in other American locations that were becoming familiar places in the imaginations of British readers – a Western newspaper office, a Texan saloon, or a Boston school room. Others simply revealed the domestic workings of the American household and the dynamics of the American workplace, or explored the day-to-day relationships of American men and women. In the process, they circulated representations of a number of distinctive American character types, including the whiskey-drinkin’, gun-tottin’, straight-talkin’ Texan; the wise-cracking Yankee of New York; the naïve countryman visiting the big city; and the unscrupulous Chicago newspaper editor. Recurring female characters included the refined Bostonian, the comparatively uncultured New Yorker, and the regularly remarrying Chicagoan. These characters often spoke in distinctive American dialects or made use of American slang. Indeed, as Chapter Four argues, jokes played a key role in exposing British readers to new American words and phrases. Experienced consumers were soon able to distinguish between a variety of phonetically written dialects including the Southern drawl, the accent attributed to African Americans, and the voice of the New England Yankee.

It is important to recognise that the vision of America presented in imported humour columns did not necessarily conform to the reality of everyday life on the other side of the Atlantic. This was an exaggerated world populated by larger-than-life characters and stereotypes. In reality, women from Chicago did not marry a new man each week, no matter how much citizens of New York wanted to believe it. Texans managed to end most days without a gunfight. Not every American schoolboy was an endless font of cheeky wisecracks. African Americans did not behave like naïve, mischievous children. Newspaper editors did more at work than make

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151 The Newcastle Weekly Courant, 26 March 1892: 2.
acerbic comments and throw aspiring poets out of their office. Most undertakers doubtlessly took their profession seriously. And conversations between husbands and wives did not usually end in a punch line. Nevertheless, by boiling down the complexities of real life into easily digested stereotypes, these jokes presented British readers with a vision of America that was knowable, in the same way that the cheeky Cockney, the dour Yorkshire man, the clod-hopping West Country labourer, and all the other regional characters of the English landscape came to stand for a familiar England constantly reinforced through the mediation of music-hall songs, pub jokes, newspaper reports and Punch cartoons. Here, in other words, was a way to access and make sense of life in the United States, and one that worked particularly well because it delivered its world in small sequential doses. Imported jokes offered readers an encounter with the landscapes, lifestyles, characters, and voices of an exciting new world. Whilst individual jokes offered only brief glimpses of America, they combined over time to form a rich cultural sediment; an imagined America fabricated from countless ‘Yankee Vignettes’.

**Conclusion**

“The most distinctive contribution which America has made to the literature of the world,” observed W. T. Stead in 1902:

> is that of humour, a department in which the Americans have left their English kinsmen far behind. He who contributes to the mirth of the world makes humanity his debtor, and the American humorists have put the English speaking world under heavy obligation.\(^{152}\)

He was absolutely right. Until the arrival of Hollywood cinema, humour was America’s most successful cultural export. Literary celebrities such as Judge Halliburton, Artemus Ward and the incomparable Mark Twain played an important role in this process, but the most pervasive form of American humour to circulate in Victorian Britain was the newspaper joke. Written by anonymous professional joke writers, these gags were clipped from the pages of American periodicals and inserted into many of Britain’s bestselling newspapers. By the final decades of the

nineteenth century, dedicated columns of imported American jokes had become regular fixtures of countless popular weeklies and magazines.

It is clear that American humour was popular with British audiences. Hard-headed newspaper editors, battling to increase circulation figures in a commercially competitive marketplace, used it as a reliable way to attract and retain readers. Alongside sports’ reporting, sensational court cases, promotional competitions and serialised fiction, American jokes became one of the most readily-recognisable characteristics of the commercial New Journalism. Accounting for the popularity of these gags is more problematic. On one level, they offered an opportunity for aggressive and condescending laughter; a way for British audiences to snigger at the eccentricities of American life and culture and thereby reinforce Britain’s supposed superiority. On the other hand, it is possible to read the British appetite for American humour as part of what this chapter terms the ‘laughter of good fellowship’. At a time when a ‘sense of humour’ became a prized character trait, British laughter at American jokes can be read as a complement rather than an attack. America’s ability to provide a ‘fresh’ new style of humour was commended by British commentators and recognised by editors who highlighted this characteristic in their branding of humour columns. Finally, as well as making audiences laugh, imported American jokes played a key role in circulating fragments of American culture and representations of American life. As people read and re-told these jokes, they were not only delighting in the style and punch-lines of a distinctive brand of humour but relishing the myriad little details of everyday life that were delivered in the process.
“The newest thing in slang,” reported the *Caledonian Mercury* in September 1862, is the Yankee phrase ‘skedaddle,’ and for it we prophesy a great success. When that singular and highly descriptive word first appeared in the American correspondence of the London journals, an ambitious gentleman, it is said, at once made the circuit of the clubs, engaged all his friends in conversation, concluding with “good bye, old fellow, I must skedaddle.” In one forenoon he enjoyed a hundred triumphs. He was the envy of his acquaintances. He was the hero of a day.¹

Within a matter of months, the word ‘skedaddle’ had transcended the rarefied atmosphere of London clubland and was circulating at all levels of British society. Letters debating its etymology were sent into *The Times* and were reprinted in several provincial papers; Wilson’s, a Glasgow-based merchant, used it in advertisements for rocking chairs; a boat named ‘Skedaddle’ took part in the Durham and Londonderry Regattas; a game named ‘skedaddle’ became popular with children; racehorses were renamed; an energetic dance named “The Skedaddle Breakdown” was performed nightly at the Haymarket Theatre in London and the Theatre Royal in Glasgow; and *Punch* quickly inserted it into the dialogue of its American characters.² This was more than just a passing fad. The word continued to thrive in Britain long after the initial waves of skedaddle-mania had subsided. For the rest of the century, and indeed beyond, it remained a stock phrase of

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¹ *The Caledonian Mercury*, 16 September 1862: 2.
British journalists and was applied to an eclectic range of people and situations. The word also appeared in correspondence columns. Dr Livingstone, for example, included it in several of his despatches from Africa, whilst ordinary readers followed suit by using the word in letters to editors. It was routinely spoken in venues ranging from racecourses and music halls, to courtrooms, political gatherings, and even parliament. In all of these myriad contexts, the inverted commas and explanatory phrases which had once demarcated it as an American import were increasingly discarded. Indeed, the word became so well established in Britain’s national vocabulary that one literary critic was forced to remind novelists that “the verb ‘skedaddle’ is no older than the American Civil War” and was, therefore, unsuitable to use in an eighteenth-century aristocratic romance. By the end of the Victorian period, a word which had once sat “smouldering... in some corner of America” had been “torn from obscurity” by the forces of transatlantic journalism and circulated in the British press until it was “familiar in every mouth”.

‘Skedaddle’ was not the only piece of American English to successfully cross the Atlantic during the nineteenth century. In the decades following the Civil War, the American language began to occupy an increasingly pervasive presence in British culture. By the 1880s – decades before the arrival of the ‘talkies’, television, and recorded music – a recognisably ‘American voice’,

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3 For British journalists using ‘skedaddle’, see: Liverpool Mercury, 8 July 1880: 7; Daily News, 26 March 1881: 4; Newcastle Courant, 1 April 1881: 6; Hampshire Advertiser, 26 October 1881: 2; North-Eastern Daily Gazette, 11 January 1882: 2; Bristol Mercury, 7 July 1882: 5; Royall Cornwall Gazette, 3 November 1882: 4; Preston Chronicle, 18 October 1884: 5; Manchester Times, 20 June 1885: 7; Pall Mall Gazette, 29 June 1885: 1; The Era, 26 December 1885: 6; Aberdeen Weekly Journal, 20 October 1887: 5; The Lancaster Gazette, 10 December 1887: 4; Ipswich Journal, 12 April 1890: 12; Freeman’s Journal, 28 February 1893: 4; The Era, 22 February 1896: 13; The Pall Mall Gazette, 14 June 1897: 2; Manchester Times, 24 February 1899: 5.

4 For examples of Livingstone’s dispatches, see Glasgow Herald, 23 April 1868: 2; The Anti-Slavery Reporter, 15 May 1868: 11; The Morning Post, 27 January 1870: 3. For letters to editors, see The Dundee Courier & Argus, 10 August 1872: 2; The Hull Packet, 30 May 1873: 3; The Times, 30 October 1875: 10; Cheshire Observer, 31 May 1876: 8; Leicester Chronicle, 2 July 1881: 6; Liverpool Mercury, 18 September 1883: 7; The Times, 22 January 1884: 10; Morning Post, 12 March 1885: 5; Horse and Hound, 19 November 1887: 10-11; Cheshire Observer, 31 May 1890: 8; Hampshire Advertiser, 11 October 1890: 6; The Chronicle of the London Missionary Society, 1 September 1892: 17-18.

5 A song called “Why did he Skedaddle Away with his Dad?” was performed by Miss Jenny Russell at Deacon’s Music Hall, see The Era, 6 August 1881: 4. For an example of ‘skedaddle’ in a courtroom, see The North-Eastern Daily Gazette, 6 January 1897: 3. For political meetings, see The Derby Mercury, 31 January 1883: 2. For parliament, see The Standard, 26 March 1881: 2.

6 The Graphic, 2 April 1898: 17.

7 Glasgow Herald, 23 June 1868: 2.
with all its social, political, and cultural connotations, was circulating throughout the country. A central player at all stages of this process was the popular press; newspapers, magazines, and periodicals played a key role in the importation, circulation, discussion and assimilation of American English. This chapter explores this complex process and is divided into three sections. Firstly, it explores how three manifestations of American English – orthographic dialect, Americanisms, and the linguistic style of American journalism – were imported into Britain via American press clippings. Secondly, it analyses the varied ways in which literary critics, cultural commentators, philologists, and journalists responded to these linguistic imports. Finally, it unpacks the social function of the American Voice by exploring the ways in which some Victorian journalists integrated the ‘racy’ style and vocabulary of their American counterparts into their own writing. Other chapters of this study examine Victorian encounters with America that took place through a number of specific genres and themes – Yankee humour, news reports, financial bulletins, travelogues, and the concept of the ‘American Future’ – but, in this chapter, we see how American culture became deeply embedded in the Victorian experience through the everyday medium of language.

The history of language in the nineteenth century has attracted interest from a variety of academic disciplines; historical linguistics, sociolinguistics, philology, dialectology, literary criticism, cultural history and social history have all contributed to our understanding of the period. This chapter engages with two key areas of the scholarship. Firstly, it seeks to challenge a series of misconceptions which have distorted histories of the English language for much of the last century. Historians of American English have tended to characterise the nineteenth century as a period of domestic linguistic development, as opposed to the explosive internationalisation of the American language which ostensibly took place at a later date in the twentieth century. John Algeo, for example, describes the period between the Declaration of Independence (1776) and the start of the Spanish-American War (1898) as the ‘National’ or ‘Adolescent’ period of American
English, compared to the ‘International’ or ‘Mature’ period that followed. The transatlantic circulation of American English in the nineteenth century has, therefore, received only a small amount of academic attention. In his ground-breaking study of *The American Language* (first published in 1919 and still in print), H. L. Mencken devotes a chapter to the exploration of ‘Americanisms in England.’ “The majority of Englishmen,” he argues, “make borrowings from the tempting and ever-widening American vocabulary, and many of these loan words take root, and are presently accepted as sound English, even by the most squeamish.” By way of example, Mencken runs through a plethora of American words and phrases such as *skedaddle, highfalutin, home-spun,* and *drug-store* which, he argues, had entered popular British discourse during the Victorian and Edwardian period. Later in the century, Allen Walker Read, one of Mencken’s most prolific disciples, briefly addressed the transatlantic ‘transit’ of American slang in a number of descriptive journal articles and lectures. More recently, R. W. Bailey has explored the history of American English abroad in his contribution to the final volume of *The Cambridge History of the English Language.* Like Mencken and Read, he stresses the extent to which American words and phrases such as *bogus, boss,* and *to lobby* successfully crossed the Atlantic during the late-nineteenth century.

However, most of these studies describe Victorian responses to American English in largely negative terms. Mencken, in particular, made no secret of his anti-British sentiments and (in a move that pre-empted classic Hollywood casting practices) depicted the British voice as a villain that attempted to thwart the heroic growth of American English. Whilst Bailey presents a

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more nuanced interpretation, his account nevertheless describes the nineteenth century as a period of “transatlantic linguistic warfare” in which Britain considered itself to be under siege from the ‘disease’ of American English. This approach is characteristic of broader histories of the English language, which typically cast Victorian Britain in the role of disapproving critic, sneering contemptuously at the new, ‘adolescent’ language taking shape in America and anxiously conspiring to halt its progress by denying it cultural legitimacy. As evidence for this interpretation, historians routinely cite the opinions of a relatively small group of literary and cultural elites. N. F Blake, for example, draws upon the work of Henry Alford, a prominent British theologian and textual critic, in support of his argument that “for most of the nineteenth century the English could pretend to ignore the example of American linguistic practice... [and] pour scorn on the corrupt English usage emanating from the other side of the Atlantic.” Similarly, Joan C. Beal cites Alford, along with commentary drawn from quarterly reviews, as proof that British attitudes ranged, throughout the nineteenth century, “from the patronizing to the downright hostile.” Other scholars have made similar claims using quotations from Southey, Coleridge, De Quincey, Ruskin, Dickens, and Arnold. What emerges from these accounts is an incongruous situation in which the Victorians seem to use Americanisms in one breath and denounce them in the next.

This chapter proposes a more nuanced interpretation of British opinion. Whilst outright opposition to American English certainly existed — and this in itself tells us that it was taken seriously — it was by no means characteristic of all responses. When we look beyond the relatively small group of reactionary commentators so often referenced by historians, it becomes clear that the Victorian relationship with the American language was a good deal more complex, more extensive, and, in many ways, more positive than has hitherto been suggested.

15 N. F. Blake, A History of the English Language: 278-279.
To his credit, Mencken briefly hints that the “guardians of English” were “often routed by public pressure” and forced to accept American imports “with the best grace possible.” However, he declines to unpack and analyse the workings and motivations of this popular response; we are left wondering how, and more importantly why, significant sections of the British public chose to subvert dominant codes of Standard English and experiment with American imports. In order to answer these questions, this chapter taps into theoretical and methodological frameworks developed in the field of sociolinguistics. An awareness of the ‘social functions’ of language – the way in which language is used, and the way in which its usage has shaped past cultures and societies – is deeply embedded into contemporary historiographical discourse. Since the ‘linguistic turn’ of the late-1980s, the relationship between language and cultural formation – the way in which identities like nationality, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality are constructed – has inspired a wealth of innovative new scholarship. This chapter draws upon this research in order to examine the role played by American English in the formation and articulation of individual, group, and national identities. In particular, it uses Patrick Joyce’s influential work on nineteenth-century dialect literature to frame a discussion of the ways in which American English was used by some cultural critics and lexicographers to reinforce national and class identities based around the use and defence of Standard English; but also by journalists and their readers to establish new identities through the subversion of Standard English; and finally by the press to create a new professional identity based around the adoption of an Americanized journalistic discourse.

**The Importation of American English**

In order to investigate the social function of American English in nineteenth-century Britain, it is first necessary to identify the forms in which the language appeared and establish the mechanics of its circulation and consumption. For the twentieth century, this process has been relatively

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well explored. Both Mencken and Bailey highlight the role played by cinema in transmitting the American language to British audiences; imported movies, they argue, caused considerable anxiety amongst purists even when American English was present only in subtitles.\(^\text{19}\) The subsequent arrival of the ‘talkies’, television, recorded popular music, and more recently the internet and video games have sustained and strengthened the presence of an ‘American Voice’.\(^\text{20}\)

For the nineteenth century, however, the picture is less clear. Mencken has explored how Victorian novelists attempted, with little success, to recreate American dialect.\(^\text{21}\) Similarly, Bailey highlights the regularity with which American characters appeared in Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes stories.\(^\text{22}\) The work of American authors is also cited; Claiborne, for example, suggests that the popular and critical success enjoyed by Fenimore Cooper, Emerson, Hawthorne, Melville, Poe, Whitman, and Twain exposed British audiences to more authentic examples of American English.\(^\text{23}\) However, one of the key players in this process has yet to be fully recognised. Mencken hints, very briefly, at the importance of the press, arguing that “a month’s study of the London newspapers will show a great many... American pollutions of the well of English.”\(^\text{24}\)

Similarly, Bailey quotes contemporary observations from Charles Mackay and John S. Farmer which stressed the pervasive ways in which American English influenced the language of popular British journalism.\(^\text{25}\) However, both authors treat the presence of American English in British newspapers as a symptom rather than an agent of the language’s diffusion. By the same token, whilst press historians such as Joel H. Wiener and Martin Conboy have rightly stressed the influence of American newspapers on the content and linguistic features of British ‘New Journalism,’ they have yet to unpack the wider implications of this process – namely, the way in

which these Americanized texts acted as vehicles, not just for the importation of American words and phrases, but for evocation of what might be termed an ‘American voice’. This section of the chapter seeks to address these under-explored areas by establishing the importance of the press as a linguistic ‘contact zone’ between Britain and America.

There were two key vehicles through which the American language reached Britain during the 19th century: people and print. Firstly, as the introduction to this study outlined, improvements in the safety, speed, and comfort of steamship travel meant that an increasing number of British travellers crossed the Atlantic and experienced American English in its natural habitat. Whilst the vast majority of Victorians never made such a trip, they were still able to encounter aspects of the American language on a second-hand basis. Upon their return, visitors often published examples of the new language in books and articles, whilst those without literary ambition, so Mencken tells us, liked to entertain, or shock, their friends with a few choice linguistic souvenirs. Working-class emigrants who travelled to the New World in steerage rather than saloons were less likely to return and offer first-hand accounts of American English, but would sometimes have given impressions of the language (either by accident or design) in letters home. However, whilst these encounters certainly had a part to play in the importation of American English, they offered most British people only occasional glimpses of the language.

Transatlantic travel was of course a two-way process. American English also made its way to Britain via Americans themselves. During the nineteenth century an increasing number of American writers, journalists, performers, politicians, social elites and tourists visited or immigrated to Britain. American actors, comedians, and musicians appeared regularly on the stage and in music-halls. Some ambitious thespians attempted to conceal their accent in the hope of winning critical approval, but those who performed in comic roles or appeared in music halls

sometimes made a virtue of their American voice. Humourists such as Mark Twain and Artemus Ward, for example, made no attempt to conceal their accent when they delivered public lectures to packed theatres. The presence of this performative American voice became increasingly commonplace as the century wore on. “There was a time when to hear the American accent on the English stage caused smiles and comments,” observed Elizabeth L. Banks, a ‘newspaper girl’ from Wisconsin who lived and worked in late-Victorian London:

Now upon the boards the ‘American Language’ is heard almost as frequently as the English tongue, while theatrical companies made up entirely of Americans come to London with the expectation of remaining the whole year round.

These voices were by no means limited to the stage. By the end of the century, London reportedly played host to an annual ‘American Invasion’ when thousands of transatlantic tourists descended each July on the capital and swelled the ranks of what Banks estimated to be twenty thousand permanent settlers. These Americans had a visible and audible presence on the streets of the capital. Banks described a congregation of Americans at a hotel tea-room in Russell Square, where there was “such a volume of American accent, American vivacity, and American dressing as would be apt to convince a foreigner dropping suddenly into the scene that London was the chief city of America.

Whilst Banks’ account of ‘American London’ is characterised by a number of endearing, but improbable, embellishments, her picturesque portrait of the city during ‘Invasion Season’ suggests that many late-Victorian Londoners would, at the very least, have heard an American voice in the flesh. Those who lived or worked in the centre of the city might even have done so on

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30 Elizabeth L. Banks, ‘American London’: 112. The digitised 1901 census for London returns 7,830 hits for people who described the United States as their birthplace. This suggests that Banks’ estimate was an exaggeration. However, this data is reliant on the accuracy of the transcription process, the practices of census takers, and the decisions of individual respondents. It should also be noted that this search methodology does not identify people who were born in Britain and migrated to America at an early age. It is also possible that Banks included areas surrounding London in her calculations.
a daily basis. It is important to stress, however, that London is rarely representative of the wider country. Whilst many Londoners may have encountered an American voice on the stage or in the city’s streets, this clearly did not happen to the same extent in a small Northern pit-village, or for that matter, in a major provincial city like Manchester. Digitised census records inform us that approximately 3.8 million people were present in the county of Lancashire on the 5th of April 1891 – only 4411 of them (0.1%) listed the United States as their birthplace. In more rural areas, as we saw in the introduction, Americans appear to have been even less common. For the majority of British people, therefore, personal encounters with walking, talking Americans would not have been part of everyday life during the late-nineteenth century. Whilst some may have heard an American perform as part of a touring theatre company or music-hall performer, it is likely that most, particularly those who lived in provincial areas, rarely, if ever, encountered an American in the flesh.

However, language does not spread solely through direct, face-to-face contact. Throughout the twentieth century, linguists, sociologists and cultural commentators connected British usage of American slang to the importation of American popular culture. When the film critic G. A. Atkinson observed in 1927 that the British public “talk America, think America, and dream America”, he laid the blame squarely at the feet of Hollywood. In subsequent decades, radio, television, recorded music, and the internet have all been identified as potent sources for the global spread of American English, as well as vehicles for what has been termed American ‘linguistic imperialism.’ Whilst it would be misleading to suggest that the United States exerted an equally powerful influence during the nineteenth century, the widespread importation of American print culture during this period created similar channels for linguistic exchange.

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It is important to recognise that the press was not the only player in this process. The work of American novelists and literary humourists were prominently featured in bookstalls throughout the country, particularly in the last half of the century, and there is evidence to suggest that these authors had an important part to play in shaping the language’s transatlantic circulation. For example, when a journalist writing for the *Musical Opinion & Music Trade Review* used the word ‘wherewithal’ in an American sense, they explained the origins of the phrase by adding “(as Mark Twain says)”\(^{34}\). As sections of this chapter demonstrate, the responses of British newspaper critics to imported American literature formed an important space in which the social functions of American English were debated and articulated. However, as this thesis has already outlined, the number of American books circulating in late-Victorian Britain was dwarfed by the presence of American print culture that appeared in the British press. In sheer quantitative terms, the American voice found a way into more Victorian households through newspapers than it did through novels.

The importance of the press should also be understood in more qualitative terms. One of the defining features of late-Victorian popular journalism was the way in which it combined a variety of different genres; news bulletins, financial intelligence, political coverage, editorials and feature articles routinely appeared in the same publication as gardening tips, fashion advice, travelogues, miscellanies, human interest stories, jokes, sports reports and serialised fiction. Each of these genres were characterised by their own unique *textualities*; they possessed different sets of linguistic rules and properties which defined their form, tone, style and vocabulary. Put simply, the linguistic techniques available to a joke writer were different to those used by a parliamentary reporter. The use of an exaggerated orthographic dialect, for example, may have been essential for a joke featuring a Yankee politician, but was inappropriate in a news report about a visiting American diplomat. Similarly, whilst the genre of serialised fiction empowered authors to use dialogue, writers of financial bulletins and sports reports were compelled to communicate in

\(^{34}\) *Musical Opinion & Music Trade Review*, 1 January 1887: 38.
different registers. The presence of contrasting voices in a single text — what Martin Conboy, drawing on one of Bhaktin’s most celebrated theoretical concepts, describes as heteroglossia — made it possible for multiple forms of American English to circulate in newspapers and magazines.\footnote{Martin Conboy, \textit{The Press and Popular Culture}: 18-22.} This chapter explores three of these linguistic forms — dialect, slang, and the distinctive style of American journalism.

**Dialect**

Orthographically-rendered dialects were arguably the most conspicuous form of American English to circulate in late-Victorian Britain. As Gavin Jones has demonstrated, dialect writing occupied an important space in the cultural landscape of Gilded Age America.\footnote{Gavin Jones, \textit{Strange Talk: The Politics of Dialect Literature in Gilded Age America}, (Berkeley, 1999).} During this period, an increasing number of the country’s writers and performers engaged with vernacular varieties of American English and reproduced them in ‘local colour’ stories, realist novels, humorous sketches, songs, poems, plays, and vaudeville acts. Writers such as George Washington Cable, Joel Chandler Harris, Thomas Nelson Page, and Kate Chopin keyed into the distinctive dialects of the American south; Bret Harte captured the vernacular of the Western frontier; Mary Murfree (pen name Charles Egbert Craddock) populated her novels and short stories with speakers of Appalachian dialects; Stephen Crane and Abraham Cahan drew upon the linguistic melting-pot of New York City; the poet James Whitcomb Riley, and the novelist Edward Eggleston used dialect in nostalgic depictions of Indiana frontier days; Paul Laurence Dunbar and Charles Bertrand Lewis (M. Quad) focused on the dialect of black Americans; and Sarah Orne Jewett produced works set on the border between Maine and New Hampshire.\footnote{The work and cultural significance of most of these figures is covered in Jones’ study. See also Elsa Nettles, \textit{Language, race, and social class in Howells’s America} (Lexington, 1988); Richard H. Brodhead, \textit{Cultures of Letters: scenes of reading and writing in nineteenth-century America}, (Chicago, 1993), ch. 4; Korey B. Jackson, “Literatures of Language: A Literary History of Linguistics in Nineteenth-Century America”, PhD Dissertation, (University of Michigan, 2010).} Mark Twain — undoubtedly the most influential
writer of American dialect – captured the distinctive speech of a New England Yankee (A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court (1889)), the raucous slang of the Western frontier (Roughing It (1872)), and the racially-charged linguistic landscape of the Deep South (The Adventures of Tom Sawyer (1876); Adventure of Huckleberry Finn (1884)).

Whilst many of these writers focused on capturing the landscapes, characters, and cultures of a particular environment, their work enjoyed a broader appeal. As well as well as circulating throughout the United States, the work of American dialect writers also reached audiences on the other side of the Atlantic. All of the authors mentioned had books reviewed (with varying degrees of success) by Victorian newspaper critics. However, for the purposes of this chapter, it is more significant to note that samples of their work (along with that of other American dialect writers) were also printed in British newspapers and magazines.

American dialects appeared in the British press in three key textual forms: poetry, fiction, and humour. Whilst it would be misleading to suggest that Victorian newspaper readers encountered American dialect poetry on a weekly basis, extracts from the likes of James Russell Lowell, Oliver Wendell Holmes, and James Whitcomb Riley occasionally appeared in periodicals and newspaper miscellany columns. Lowell’s Biglow Papers – a series of satirical poems written in Yankee dialect – were a particular favourite of British editors and continued to reappear in poetry columns, literary reviews and as quotations in news stories several decades after they were originally published.

Literary sketches, short stories, and serialised fiction also provided British

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audiences with opportunities to sample American dialect. Some of these texts were written entirely in regional American vernaculars, but most authors drew upon dialect only when representing the speech of certain characters. For example, in ‘Dick’s Cousin Jessie’ – a serialised story published in the British children’s periodical Young Folks in 1884 – the American writer, Rose Hartwick Thorpe, used standard American English for the dialogue of her white American characters and a distinctive ‘negro’ dialect for their black maid:

“Aunt Dinah,” said Dick, with a sweeping bow, “allow me to make you acquainted with my cousin, Miss Jessie Burns, from Topeka, Kansas.”

“De law sakes alibe, chile! I fout dat Jesse Burns were a boy, an’ I was goin’ to look up some comfortin’ passage ob Scripter soon’s ebber de mawnin’ work was fru.”

Similarly, when Margaret Bertha Wright published a short story entitled “Some Western Experiences” in the monthly periodical London Society, she used standard east-coast American English for her first-person narration, but switched to dialect when representing the speech patterns of people she met in a far-western prairie village: “‘Marm’”, asked one woman shortly after the author arrived in town, “‘who be you a-lookun fer? I ken put you stre?’ (straight)”.

Wright’s decision to add a translation for this final phrase was an unusual concession to Victorian readers – most ‘local colour’ writers (and, by extension, their British editors) appear to have been happy to entrust readers with the task of deciphering passages of dialect unaided. Indeed, as subsequent sections of this chapter argue, this may well have been an important element of their transatlantic appeal.

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Dundee Courier, 4 April 1876: 2; Dundee Courier, 26 June 1876: 2; Bristol Mercury, 23 March 1880: 3; Penny Illustrated Paper, 12 June 1880: 2; Leeds Mercury, 28 July 1880: 3; Pall Mall Gazette, 4 October 1881: 4; Pall Mall Gazette, 31 January 1887: 1; Dundee Courier, 13 August 1891: 3; Reynolds’s Newspaper, 8 November 1891: 4; The Weekly Standard and Express (Blackburn), 21 January 1899: 10; Daily News, 6 June 1900: 7.


41 Margaret Bertha Wright, “Some Western Experiences”, London Society, 41:245, (1882): 449-445, (450). Wright was married to Charles Henry Wright, city editor of the Chicago Times, and appears to have earned a living as a contributor to Anglo-American magazines and periodicals following his death in 1869. In 1887 she is recorded as living in Cambridge, Massachusetts. See F. K. Upham, Genealogy and Family History of the Uphams (1887), pp. 29-30.
Whilst poetry, serialised fiction, and ‘local colour’ stories played an important role in circulating representations of regional American speech, the most pervasive vehicle for American dialect to circulate in the British press was newspaper humour. As Chapter Three explored, imported American jokes often took the form of short, comic vignettes featuring a conversation between two or more characters. Whilst these texts, rather like the ones quoted above, often drew on crude racial, regional, and gender stereotypes for comic effect, they nevertheless exposed British audiences to a variety of stylised transatlantic voices. For example, in May 1897 *Lloyds’ Weekly News* printed the following joke taken from the American comic magazine, *Judge*:

**Bronco Bates:** Howdy, Cale? My Wife ‘lowed you mought loan her yer spurs this afternoon ef ye warn’t usin’ em.

**Cayuse Cale:** Sartin, pard. Is she off fer a hoss-back canter?

**Bronco Bates:** Nary, Cale. She’s makin’ a batch uv cookies fer th’ new parson’s wife, an’ she wants th’ spurs ter deckerate ‘em up shrumpshus-like, Savvy?42

Whilst this representation of ‘Far Western’ speech is clearly exaggerated, it nevertheless presented British readers with an example of American English in action. Here was a fully reproduced manner of speaking, complete with its own distinctive conversational patterns, words and accent. In order to interpret its phonetic spellings, readers were required to sound passages of dialect out – to speak, however imperfectly, like an ‘American’. Moreover, the social function of jokes encouraged readers to try these passages of dialect on their friends, perhaps even to compete to see who made the most convincing cowboy. Decades before the arrival of the talkies, the distinctive dialects of the wisecracking Yankee, the high spirited Westerner, the overly refined Bostonian, the mischievous ‘negro’, and the mysterious Native American – or, at least, heavily stylised versions of such dialects – were familiar to regular readers of comic periodicals, as well as the audiences of the most popular provincial weeklies.

The responses of British readers to these dialects are difficult to track. As Chapter Three outlined, American newspaper humour attracted relatively little comment from contemporary

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observers, whilst the opinions of ordinary readers were not recorded in personal testimony. There is, however, evidence from contemporary commentators to suggest that British audiences enjoyed these samples of authentic American dialect. For example, in its review of Mark Twain’s lecture on the Sandwich Islands, *The Standard* highlighted his use of Western dialect and admitted that it made his witticisms all the more ‘racy’. It hoped that the “delicious dialects of California” would continue to enrich the quality of American humour.\(^43\) Similarly, when the American actress Gertrude Kellogg appeared before an audience in London in 1881, *The Era* reported that:

> [h]er recital of… [a] poem from the ‘Biglow Papers’…, written in the racy dialect of Yankeeland, appeared to greatly please her audience… Some of the whimsical turns of expression and their eccentric delivery caused much mirth.\(^44\)

Even *The Morning Post*, which usually took a dim view of both Twain and the American language, grudgingly admitted that *The Gilded Age* contained “true reproductions of American vernacular, [which] to some persons… may not be without [their] amusing side.”\(^45\)

Each of these reviewers highlighted the amusing nature of American dialect as its most attractive property. Unpacking the nature of this laughter returns us to familiar territory – namely, the question of whether audiences were being invited to laugh condescendingly at America’s linguistic eccentricities or take a more good-natured pleasure in the country’s linguistic creativity. In some forms of British humour, American dialects were certainly intended to invite condescending forms of anti-American laughter. Jane W. Stedman, for example, has explored the representation of American dialects in *Punch*.\(^46\) Like many of its contemporaries, *Punch* relied heavily on dialect humour; the peculiar vocabularies and accents of Scotland, Wales, Ireland, Yorkshire, Suffolk, and London’s East End were, as Stedman points out, regularly lampooned in

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\(^43\) *The Standard*, 14 October 1873: 6.
\(^44\) *The Era*, 2 July 1881: 9.
\(^45\) *The Morning Post*, 26 January 1874: 3. In its review of the Sandwich Islands lecture, the paper conceded that Twain’s dialect “was not unpleasant to listen to” – high praise indeed.
\(^46\) Jane W. Stedman, ‘American English in *Punch*’.
the magazine’s cartoon captions, stories, parodies, and comic verses.\textsuperscript{47} The language of America was not exempt from this form of mockery.\textsuperscript{48} Stedman argues that \textit{Punch} primarily used these dialects as a way to ridicule American people and culture. “Perversions of pronunciation, vocabulary, and syntax,” she argues, “immediately identified” a character as American and ‘stigmatised’ them in the eyes of British readers. This technique was particularly apparent in an uncomplimentary reimagining of Abraham Lincoln’s second inaugural address:

Well, we’ve done it, gentlemen. Bully for us. Cowhided the copperheads considerable...

Rebellion is a wicked thing, gentlemen, an awful wicked thing, and the mere nomenclating thereof would make my hair stand on end, if it could be more standonender.\textsuperscript{49}

‘Bully for us’, ‘cowhided’, and ‘copperheads’ are all American expressions, as was the use of ‘awful’ to mean ‘exceedingly’ and the incorrect use of ‘considerable’. The creation of new verbs and adjectives out of existing words – ‘nomenclating’ and ‘standonender’ – was considered to be an archetypal American characteristic by British purists. The use of ‘nomenclating,’ rather than simpler alternatives such as ‘naming’, also highlights a supposed American tendency to invent grandiloquent sounding words in order to seem intelligent and cultured. The remainder of the speech follows in a similar vein and regularly descends into mixed metaphors, inappropriate jokes, misinterpreted or flippant references to the bible, and even includes sections where the president imitates other stylised American dialects and impersonates the characters in a ‘nigger story.’\textsuperscript{50} This was by no means unusual, but for all its hostility, it reminds us that the writers of \textit{Punch} assumed their readers would easily recognise these caricatured American linguistic traits.

Even during periods of amicable Anglo-American relations, \textit{Punch} used exaggerated renderings of

\textsuperscript{48} In fact, Stedman describes the American language as \textit{Punch}’s “greatest [and most] consistent source of language humour”: 171.
\textsuperscript{49} \textit{Punch}, 10 December 1894: 3.
\textsuperscript{50} \textit{Punch}, 10 December 1894: 3.
American dialects to express its disapproval of American linguistic practices. Almost invariably, they were presented as something for an educated, culturally conservative and patriotic audience to ‘titter’ at, secure in its own command of Standard English.

The fact that Punch sought to belittle Americans by parodying their speech patterns highlights the importance of language in the formation, articulation, and interpretation of national identity. As Benedict Anderson observes, possession of a shared language was central to the creation of imagined national communities. In particular, Anderson highlights the emergence of mechanically produced ‘print-languages’, disseminated through a capitalist marketplace, as a particularly important stage in the development of a national consciousness. “These print languages”, he goes on to say:

created unified fields of exchange and communication... [Which allowed] speakers of the huge varieties of Frenches, Englishes, or Spanishes, who might find it difficult or even impossible to understand one another in conversation... [to comprehend] one another via print and paper. In the process, they gradually became aware of the hundreds of thousands, even millions, of people in their particular language-field, and at the same time that only those hundreds of thousands, or millions, so belonged. These fellow-readers, to whom they were connected through print, formed, in their secular, particular, visible invisibility, the embryo of the nationally imagined community.\(^51\)

The development of this kind of national print-language was dependent on a number of social, cultural and technological factors: the codification of a linguistic standard; the invention of mass printing technologies; the emergence of national print distribution networks; mass literacy and hence a mass education system; and the expansion of opportunities in which print culture could be consumed. It is no surprise, therefore, that historians and sociolinguists have identified the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as a period in which language began to play an increasingly central role in the formation and interpretation of national communities.

However, in order to make sense of British responses to American dialect it is vital to recognise that the link between language and national identity has *symbolic* as well as *practical* dimensions. As well as uniting people into imagined national speech communities, language also

\(^{51}\) Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*: 44.
functions as what Jerzy Smolicz terms one of their ‘core values’; a fundamental component of a
group’s culture which serves to symbolise its membership, belief systems, and social practices.  

This symbiotic link between the characteristics of a people and those of their language emerged
in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as a central feature of European nationalist thought.  

“From every language”, argued the German philosopher Wilhelm von Humboldt, “we can infer
backwards to the national character.” Humboldt was by no means the only figure to reach these
conclusions. As Tony Crowley has demonstrated, the idea that “language was not simply a
guarantor of nationality but the repository of national identity” was in wide circulation in
nineteenth century Britain, not least in the popular press, and played a key role in shaping both
the scientific study of language and its broader social function.  

Victorian encounters with American English were shaped by this discourse of linguistic nationalism. When British journalists
and newspaper readers engaged with American language, they entered into a direct dialogue with
American national identity. When *Punch* chose to ridicule Yankee dialect, it was inviting readers to
interpret these error-strewn and unrefined forms of speech as markers of America’s defective
national character.

The significance of national identity in transatlantic linguistic encounters was heightened by
American English’s emergence as a post-revolutionary nationalist project. Whilst American English
began to deviate from British English soon after the arrival of the first colonists, historians such as
David Crystal, Frederic G. Cassidy, David Simpson and N. F. Blake have located its emergence as a
systematically defined and domestically accepted alternative to British English in the late-

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thoughtful critique of Smolicz theory, see Leigh Oakes, *Language and National Identity: Comparing France
54 Wilhelm von Humboldt, *On Language: The Diversity of Human Language Structure and its Influence on
55 Tony Crowley, *Language and History*: 125.
eighteenth and early-nineteenth century. The Declaration of Independence in 1776 is invariably highlighted as a watershed moment. Before the revolution, so the classic narrative runs, many Americans adopted a deferential attitude towards British culture. In matters of spelling, vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation, London was regarded as the arbiter of all that was tasteful, sophisticated, respectable, and correct. However, in the wake of independence, a sense began to emerge that the new nation should no longer take linguistic cues from Britain, but should celebrate, codify, and develop its own branch of American English. As Simpson argues, whilst an ambition to change, fix, and analyse language had been common amongst Americans throughout the eighteenth century, it took on a new intensity as it became “part of the American ideal” in the years following 1776.

This patriotic spirit found different avenues of expression: it was suggested in some circles that the country be renamed Columbia or Fredonia; several attempts were made to establish an ‘American Society of Language’; American grammars, spellers and dictionaries were produced; and the role of language was debated regularly in the quality press. The most prominent player in this process was Noah Webster, a teacher, lexicographer, spelling reformer, political commentator, editor, and prolific author whose contributions to the development of American

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57 Of course, this cultural deference towards Britain did not disappear after independence. Throughout the nineteenth century, American authors and actors looked towards Britain for recognition and approval, and the leading lights of British culture enjoyed a high status in America.

58 David Simpson, *The Politics of American English*: 24. It is this new assertive independence that distinguishes American English from the literature coming out of more subordinate colonial contexts. Interestingly, it is only in the post-colonial period that we really see an upsurge in new critical voices coming out of ex-colonial centres. See for example, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (London, 1989)

English made him into something of an American cultural hero. Published between 1783 and 1785, his first major contribution to the field was a school textbook entitled *A Grammatical Institute of the English Language*. Whilst spellings in the original edition deviated little from Samuel Johnson’s British standard, by 1787 Webster was part of a thriving patriotic movement which sought to jettison the ‘corrupt’ and ‘decaying’ language of a distant Old World and remodel the English language along American lines. “As an independent nation,” he confidently proclaimed,

> Our honor requires us to have a system of our own, in language as well as government. Great Britain, whose children we are, and whose language we speak, should no longer be our standard; for the taste of her writers is already corrupted, and her language on the decline. But if it were not so, she is at too great a distance to be our model, and to instruct us in the principles of our own tongue.

As early as the 1780s, American observers were raising the subject of British ‘degeneration’ and arguing that America offered an antidote. Citizens of the new republic confidently proclaimed that it would soon replace Britain as the leading arbiter of culture and taste; America would become a ‘city upon a hill’, destined to outshine the fading light of a crumbling, degenerate Old World. Of course, in these early decades, America was unable to turn this bombastic rhetoric into reality. Nevertheless, a message was sent across the Atlantic which would shape Anglo-American relations throughout the nineteenth century. The United States, it seemed, was determined to gain political and economic independence from Britain and also to challenge its cultural hegemony. Crucially, for the purposes of this chapter, it chose to articulate this brash new national identity by creating, codifying, and celebrating a distinctive American voice.

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61 *Noah Webster, Dissertations on the English Language*, (1789): 20.

62 The phrase ‘city upon a hill’ is adapted from a bible passage (Matthew 5:14) and entered the American lexicon via a 1630 sermon by the Puritan colonist John Winthrop. It has since been evoked regularly in connection with the concept of American exceptionalism.
These developments did not go unnoticed in Britain, nor were they meant to. Long before the Declaration of Independence transformed the development of American English into a politically charged process, British observers were beginning to acknowledge the country’s linguistic peculiarities. As Allen Walker Read has demonstrated, British responses to the English of colonial America were remarkably positive. A number of British travellers praised the ‘purity’ of the colonist’s language and favourably compared the uniformity of their speech to the disparate nature of British regional dialects. “The propriety of Language here surprized me much,” observed Scottish nobleman, Lord Adam Gordon, during his 1764-65 tour of the colonies, “the English tongue being spoken by all ranks, in a degree of purity and perfection, surpassing any, but the polite part of London.” Reservations were occasionally expressed about the American vocabulary – travellers were confused to discover that partings in the road were known as ‘forks’, that ‘lengthy’ was used to mean ‘long’, or that insects were referred to as ‘bugs’ – but the majority of responses appear to have ranged from paternal tolerance to enthusiastic approval. The forgiving tone of these responses reflects the fact that during the middle of the eighteenth century America remained a source of British pride rather than a rebellious rival; this was a time when the colony promised to secure Britain’s future rather than threaten it.

In the half century following the Declaration of Independence, British views of American English were shaped by a new Anglo-American dynamic. Britain no longer played the role of indulgent parent and was less disposed to overlook America’s linguistic deviations. Moreover, the emergence of American English, first as a concept and then as a reality, invested American speech with a new potency. What had once been regarded as a harmless colonial dialect was now an increasingly self-assertive language which openly sought to subvert, and indeed to challenge, the

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cultural primacy of Standard English. These heightened cultural politics were reflected in a fresh wave of British responses. Travel writers visiting the new republic invariably passed comment on the peculiarities of American speech. As historians have so often demonstrated, some of these writers, such as Frances Trollope, John Mactaggart, Frederick Marryat, Thomas Hamilton, and of course Dickens, condemned the ‘corruptions’ and ‘vulgari­ties’ that they encountered; “Here,” Mactaggart gloomily prophesised, “is the ruination of our classic English language.”66 The linguistic properties of the new American literary school received similar condemnations from British literary critics. The Annual Review, for example, criticised John Marshall’s Life of George Washington (1807), claiming that:

Duty obliges us to notice the following instances of incorrect language... [twelve supposed ‘errors’ are highlighted]... We have been more particular in noticing these faults in Mr. Marshall’s language, because we are not at all certain that the Americans do not consider them as beauties, and because we wish if possible to stem that torrent of barbarous phraseology with which the American writers threaten to destroy the purity of the English language.67

Whilst it is important to stress that not all British responses to American English were so instinctively hostile, this sense of foreboding highlights the new threat that the American language, in all its fresh vigour and nationalist rhetoric, seemed to pose to ‘classic English language’. It is inconceivable, for example, that MacTaggart or any of the other critics of the emerging American voice would have felt a similar sense of threat from British regional dialects or any of the new linguistic forms coming out of colonial centres. America was manifestly different.

The reactionary response of early-Victorian commentators to America’s linguistic independence highlights the fact that language was equally important to the formation of British national identity during this period. As social and cultural historians have observed, the

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nineteenth century witnessed the rise of Standard English as a powerful force in British culture and society.\(^{68}\) Whilst the process of actual linguistic standardisation took place over several centuries, the emergence of Standard English as an ideology is generally said to have begun in the late-eighteenth century onwards when a particular form of the language (based largely on the dialect of elite London society) was codified by the emerging field of amateur and professional lexicography, circulated through expanding capitalist print networks, reinforced through a standardisation and expansion of educational provision, and policed by literary critics and cultural commentators. Whilst it is important to recognise that Standard English did not sweep aside all other forms of language, a particular way of writing and speaking nevertheless established itself during this period as an essential mark of culture and respectability, and an important symbol of English national identity.

The symbolic significance of Standard English as a ‘core value’ of British national identity is neatly encapsulated by one of its alternative titles. Whilst the term ‘Queen’s English’ circulated in British discourse from the beginning of Victoria’s reign, evidence from Google’s Ngram viewer (Fig 4.1) suggests that usage increased dramatically in the mid-1860s, gradually returned to its earlier levels in the 1870s, and increased again in the 1880s.\(^{69}\) If we plot these results alongside a similar search for the term ‘Standard English’, we see that the frequency patterns of both phrases followed a broadly similar course. However, two points of divergence are worth noting and probably deserve closer scrutiny. Firstly, popular usage of the term ‘Standard English’ appears to have increased significantly in the late 1860s, peaked in the mid-1870s, and then declined for the rest of the century. Whilst it is difficult to pin down the social, cultural, political, or economic undercurrents which may have shaped this pattern, increased usage of the term coincides with

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\(^{69}\) A similar search using newspaper databases produced too many false hits. In particular, the search engine was unable to consistently filter out variations of the word ‘Queen’s’ which did not include the crucial possessive apostrophe. Whilst Google Ngram is not without its faults, its search engine is capable of handling more precise terms.
the period in which debates on compulsory education were particularly prominent. Here, in other words, is a term that tended to be used in what we might describe as internal discourses on national education and culture. The term ‘Queen’s English’, on the other hand, peaks in the second half of the 1860s, dips in the 1870s, and increases again in the 1880s and 1890s. Whilst it is possible to read too much into this suggestive pattern, these peaks coincide with periods in which America loomed particularly large in the Victorian imagination. Usage of the term appears to have skyrocketed during the American Civil War and increased again precisely at the moment in which American economic competition and cultural confidence began to stimulate anxiety among the British public. It suggests, in other words, that this term was used primarily in what we might call external discourses where the ‘Queen’s English’ was pitted against American English and highlights the fundamental significance of language as a symbol of British national identity.

Fig 4.1 A Search for the terms ‘Queen’s English’ and ‘Standard English’ using Google Ngram Viewer. Results displayed with a ‘smoothing’ of 1.
All of this evidence suggests that when literary critics berated an author for writing in an American vernacular, and when *Punch* gleefully published grotesque parodies of American dialects, they were not simply attacking American linguistic eccentricities, but demonstrating and reinforcing their commitment to a particular form of Britishness. Whilst it is possible to observe these acts of identity affirmation taking place throughout the nineteenth century, the emotions underpinning them underwent a subtle but important change. Early responses to American English were, for the most part, self-confident assertions of Britain’s linguistic superiority. For all of its energetic displays of nationalism, America posed little threat to Britain’s economic, political, and cultural power in the immediate aftermath of independence; whilst purists may have bemoaned the way Webster and his contemporaries rushed to disfigure their linguistic inheritance, they did not see American English as a credible challenge. However, as Chapter Two outlined, the final decades of the nineteenth century witnessed growing British anxieties about the coming ‘American Future’. Whilst these concerns were initially fuelled by escalating economic competition between British and American manufacturers, they took on powerful new cultural dimensions as the concept of an ‘American future’ took hold. American English was invested with a new potency. Consider, for example, this review of John S. Farmer’s dictionary of *Americanisms Old and New*, published by the *Daily News* in 1889:

The great American language, which, as everyone knows, is the language of the future, has the foundation-stone of its literary monument in a book just privately printed by Messrs. POULTER and SONS... The work is to be commended on every ground, and especially as an attempt to enable us to learn the American language which our children will have to speak. In a few years it will be as idle to visit any part of the world without American as it is to visit the Levant without Italian... We shall all have to buy and sell, to make love and marry in that universal tongue... Little boys and girls should be encouraged to turn sentences from *Texas Siftings*, of *The Burlington Hawke Eye* into English prose, or passages from BACON, MILTON, SOUTH, and BARROW into the American of the *Detroit Free Press*... The older men of this generation may find a new consolation for mortality in the thought that they, at least need never have to write and speak in this way. Their sons and daughters cannot begin the new learning too soon... [T]he time will come soon enough... when existing dictionaries of the QUEEN’S English will be glossaries and no more.⁷⁰

It is important to recognise that this review was written in an appropriately American spirit of wry exaggeration, and that most British critics would not have accepted the prospect of teaching their children American English with quite the same playful nonchalance. Nevertheless, the affected casualness with which the *Daily News* addressed the topic, and its use of the phrase “as everyone knows”, suggests that the growing power and influence of American English was indeed widely recognised.

This presents us with a new context in which to unpack the hostile responses of many late-Victorian critics. At a time when Britain was finding it increasingly difficult to compete on a commercial level with America, preservation of its cultural authority became increasingly important. If Britain was no longer to define itself as the ‘workshop of the world’, it could act as an arbiter of good taste by performing the role of linguistic gatekeeper. When this cultural authority was itself challenged by the growing influence of American English, it is hardly surprising that many Victorian commentators rushed to the defence of what increasingly became known as the Queen’s English. It is entirely possible that late-Victorian journalists and their readers engaged with fragments of imported American dialect in this context; that they laughed at the peculiar accents, vocabularies and speech patterns of regional America in order to assert and reinforce their own national identity at a time when it was coming under increasing pressure. However, it is important to recognise that Victorian responses to American English were not determined solely by questions of national identity.

The most obvious example is the way in which American language was used by different sections of British society as a critique of the established political and cultural order. We have already seen how Chartists had an understandable sympathy for America and all that it stood for in terms of democratic principles. By the late-nineteenth century, new political forces in the country had adopted a similar relationship with the United States; the radical wing of the Liberal party in the shape of Bright, Stead, and even Gladstone himself had a sympathetic attitude to
America. In the case of Stead, this admiration for America’s democratic principles translated into an enthusiastic adoption of American language and culture. The new socialist movements of the period had a similar sympathy for American values and could use American language and culture as a way to challenge the more conservative elements of British society. In some cases, the American way of life was invoked in an explicit and very conscious way and offered as an alternative to the class-based system that dominated British society. The American language presented a subtler, though no less powerful, critique of establishment values. This is not to say that everyone who reacted positively to the American language were from the progressive left of British society; there are numerous examples of more conservative papers reacting warmly to the American language. However, there can be little doubt that American language, as well as American politics, was most often associated with progressive forces in British society. In this sense, responses to American English were determined by class identities as well as national. As the next section demonstrates, in order to fully unpack the social function of American English in this period it is also necessary to explore its role in the formation of social and professional identities.

Americanisms

One of the defining qualities of nineteenth-century American English was its ever-expanding vocabulary. Much of this linguistic innovation stemmed from contact with other languages and cultures. In the aftermath of independence, the expansion of the western frontier and the arrival of immigrants from almost every county of Europe transformed the United States into a cultural ‘melting pot’; a space where a variety of nationalities, cultures, religions, and ethnicities came into daily contact and gradually coalesced into a shared ‘American’ voice.\textsuperscript{71} Cañon, coyote, corral, chaps, ranch, siesta, lasso, bronco, buckaroo, mesa, vamoose, and

\textsuperscript{71} It is important to stress, of course, that migrant identities were not wholly subsumed by this multicultural ‘American’ identity. For a fascinating insight into the history of one particular migrant identity in 19\textsuperscript{th} century America, see the AHRC funded project, ‘Locating the Hidden Diaspora: The English in North America in Transatlantic Perspective, 1760-1950’, <http://www.englishdiaspora.co.uk> [accessed on 11/11/2011].
**Stampede**, to take only a few examples, were all borrowed or adapted from Spanish.\(^{72}\) Similarly, the French language contributed words such as *bureau, prairie, gopher, bogus, flume, depot, crevasse, levee,* and *picayune.*\(^{73}\) The creators of this new vocabulary also crafted their own words and phrases. Frontier territories such as Nevada proved particular fertile grounds for linguistic creativity.\(^{74}\) Away from the more refined atmosphere of the East Coast, settlers made few attempts to conform to existing rules and standards, and peppered their language with exaggeration, descriptive and metaphorical inventions, as well as flashes of humour. Many of these phrases are still in circulation; *dog eat dog, to keep one’s eyes peeled, easy as falling off a log, get even, get the hang of (something), bury the hatchet, nip and tuck, paddle one’s own canoe, take a shine to, keep one’s shirt on, know-how, know-nothing,* and *to pull the wool over one’s eyes* all originated in the *rambunctious* atmosphere of the Western frontier.\(^{75}\) The cities of the East were also fertile ground for a different kind of linguistic invention.\(^{76}\) In the world of American politics, for example, English words such as *president, senate, congress* and *assembly* were given new meanings and turned into adjectives such as *presidential,* whilst new political terms such as *spoils system, pork barrel, gerrymander, landslide,* and *to stump* also entered popular discourse.\(^{77}\) Similarly, new urban lifestyles, cultures, and technologies quickly inspired a modern vocabulary; *telegrams, skyscrapers, department stores, bargain basements, subways,* *cable-cars, street-cars, elevators, commuters,* and *dime museums* were all linguistic products of the American city. Snapshots of this linguistic creativity were captured by successive editions of John Russell Bartlett’s *Dictionary of Americanisms.* The first edition, published in 1848, listed the

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\(^{73}\) Suzanne Romaine, ‘Contact with other languages’: 171-173.

\(^{74}\) In chapter 47 of *Roughing It* (1872), Twain famously quipped that “Slang was the language of Nevada. It was hard to preach a sermon without it, and be understood.”


definitions and etymologies of several thousand American words and phrases and ran to 400 pages.\textsuperscript{78} By 1877, the continued creation of new words and phrases allowed Bartlett to produce a ‘Greatly Improved and Enlarged’ third edition of the Dictionary which contained more than 800 pages of words and phrases which were distinctively American.\textsuperscript{79}

This emerging American vocabulary was not restricted to dictionaries but was also recorded, shaped, and circulated by a burgeoning American print culture. The press played a particularly significant role in this process. By the 1830s, dailies such as the New York Sun were appearing in cities throughout the country, whilst many of the smallest hamlets and frontier towns launched their own newspapers. These publications absorbed the unconventional vocabulary of their audience and gave it a wider voice; regional American spellings, words, phrases, and slang terms were an increasingly common feature of many popular newspapers and, under a culture of rampant scissors-and-paste journalism, were circulated throughout the country. In many cases, journalists themselves were responsible for coining new words and phrases. For example, the term ‘O.K.’ – arguably America’s most popular contribution to the world’s vocabulary – is thought to have been invented in the late 1830s as part of a journalistic fad for humorous abbreviations.\textsuperscript{80} However, for the purposes of this thesis, perhaps the most important role played by the press in the development of the American vocabulary was as a vehicle for its transatlantic circulation.

Whilst fully rendered dialects offered British newspaper readers the most concentrated and immersive encounter with American speech, they were not the most pervasive form of American English to appear in the press. Phonetic spellings and other orthographic techniques

\textsuperscript{78} John Russell Bartlett, \textit{Dictionary of Americanisms: A Glossary of Words and Phrases usually regarded as peculiar to The United States}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed. (Boston and London, 1859).


were only suitable for use within a limited range of journalistic genres. As a result, the presence of American dialects in the British press was largely confined to columns of imported American humour, some dialect poetry, occasional pieces of serialised fiction, and parodies produced by the likes of *Punch*. However, individual American words and phrases – what British commentators generally referred to as ‘Americanisms’ – were capable of crossing textual and cultural boundaries with much greater ease than fully-rendered dialects. As a result, they circulated across a broader range of journalistic genres and reached a far larger audience.

Americanisms crossed the Atlantic within a wide variety of American press clippings. For example, the Californian word ‘hoodlum’ appeared in the British press for the first time (according to our online databases) in an instalment of a North American travelogue published by *The Leeds Mercury* in May 1873.81 A few months later, *The Standard’s* New York correspondent used the word (with a definition appended for the benefit of British readers) in his summary of a news story about a San Franciscan judge.82 The following morning, this story was reprinted without attribution by the *Birmingham Daily Post*.83 In December *The Times* printed the word ‘hoodlum’ in a report sent by ‘An Occasional Correspondent’ stationed in San Francisco.84 The following April, the word appeared in the ‘Scraps’ column of the *Manchester Times* in the form of a humorous quote from the dramatic critic of a San Francisco paper.85 In September, *The Bradford Observer* printed a darkly humorous story clipped from the *San Francisco Chronicle* about a local ‘hoodlum’ who played a cruel trick on a ‘melancholy paralytic’, only to reveal that the man had been faking his disability in order to receive charitable donations.86 By the following April, the word had begun to float free from its Californian origins and was printed in a clipping from the

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81 *Leeds Mercury*, 17 May 1873: 12.
82 *The Standard*, 2 October 1873: 5.
84 *The Times*, 29 December 1873: 8.
85 *Manchester Times*, 18 April 1874: 5. This was reprinted in *The Wrexham Advertiser*, 25 April 1874: 7; *The Newcastle Courant*, 1 May 1874: 3.
Dallas Herald published by The Dundee Courier. By 1877, it had aroused sufficient curiosity in Britain for the Leeds Mercury to publish an extract from the Philadelphia Public Ledger explaining precisely “WHO THE ‘HOODLUMS’ ARE.” By this point, British papers such as the Pall Mall Gazette began using the term themselves to describe the “half-educated, self-indulgent, cruel, and covetous animal product of young America.” Inevitably, it was not long before the word attracted the attention of comic periodicals such as Punch and Funny Folks, and children’s magazines such as Boys of England, who began to use it in connection with American characters. By the 1880s, the word was sufficiently established in British discourse for Stead’s Pall Mall Gazette to use it without explanation, inverted commas, or any reference to America. Hoodlums were now members of the “Bandit Gangs of London.”

Whilst Americanisms were capable of circulating within most forms of imported American print culture, American humour provided the richest seedbed. Even when full dialects were not in use, the rich vocabulary of America was an ever-present feature of imported jokes. Stock American phrases such as “I guess”, “I reckon”, and “I calculate” were a recurring feature of dialogue and an immediate marker of a character’s American identity. Other slang terms, such as to ‘pan out’, appeared first in American humour clippings before entering wider journalistic discourse. In many cases, Americanisms formed the basis of a joke. For example, the Isle of Wight Observer published a column of ‘American Humour’ in September 1883 which contained the following gags:

Young Muggins recently became a party to a very interesting slight-of-hand performance. His girl gave him the mitten.

87 Dundee Courier, 12 April 1875: 3.  
88 Leeds Mercury, 15 August 1877: 2.  
89 Pall Mall Gazette, 11 May 1878: 1.  
90 Punch, 21 August 1880: 73; Funny Folks, 4 September 1880: 283; Boys of England, 4 June 1880: 3.  
91 Pall Mall Gazette, 13 October 1888: 1.  
92 For examples, see: Isle of Wight Observer, 5 July 1884: 6; Huddersfield Daily Chronicle, 17 April 1876: 4; North Wales Chronicle, 18 June 1881: 2; The Essex Standard, 22 December 1883: 8; Hampshire Telegraph, 17 May 1884: 12; The Newcastle Weekly Courant, 16 March 1889: 2; Birmingham Daily Post, 27 December 1895: 2; Berrow’s Worcester Journal, 5 December 1896: 11.
At the White Mountains the girls all comb their hair back from the forehead. That is why it is called a bang-up place.

L. Remarked to his wife that a friend “had plenty of grit.” “Well, yes,” she replied, “he looks as if he needed a bath.” 93

The phrase ‘gave him the mitten’ was a popular Americanism meaning to ditch a male admirer, ‘bang’ was an Americanism for a fringe of hair, and ‘plenty of grit’ was U.S. slang for pluck or strength of character. The frequency with which these puns were published in Yankee humour columns suggests that British editors were confident their readers could decipher their slightly opaque meanings. Similarly, the fact that editors chose to retain Americanisms such as ‘skedaddle’ and ‘hoodlum’ in imported news clippings, rather than replace them with British alternatives like ‘retreat’ and ‘ruffian’, or indeed the late-nineteenth century Anglo-Irish term, ‘hooligan’, suggests that readers relished these encounters with the American vocabulary. 94

The presence of Americanisms in the British press was not limited to imported American print culture. Between 1870 and 1900, articles devoted to the United States’ burgeoning new vocabulary were published by many British newspapers, magazines, and periodicals. These sources provide a starting point from which to explore a range of Victorian responses to American English. Like the work of literary critics, articles on Americanisms were characterised by a lack of consensus; attitudes ranged from outright hostility to enthusiastic approval, but the majority sat somewhere in the middle. In some cases, an author criticised the ‘corruptions’ and ‘vulgarity’ of American words in one breath, before professing admiration for their ‘racy,’ ‘fresh,’ and ‘picturesque’ nature in the next. An example of this contradictory approach appeared in an article by Grant Allen entitled ‘The Great American Language,’ which was published in the Cornhill

93 Isle of Wight Observer, 22 September 1883: 5. My italics.
94 This form of translation was certainly open to British editors. In 1897, the publishers Abbott, Jones, & Co. advertised a new edition of Alcott’s Little Women in which “all the Americanisms are done away with.” See Belfast News-Letter, 16 February 1897: 3. Similarly, a story by the American author Sarah Hepburn Hayes contained Americanisms when it was published in the Philadelphia periodical, Arthur’s Home Magazine, in 1861, but many of these words were translated into British alternatives when the piece was published in The Ladies Treasury in 1863. Credit for this discovery goes to Stephan Pigeon and Leslie Howsam.
Magazine in 1888. Allen’s article ostensibly set out to critique the ‘modern abominations’ of late nineteenth-century American English. It opened with the claim that Edgar Allan Poe, once a great champion of the American language, would have rejected its current form, and then concluded by associating American English with the “nethermost depths of pure vulgarity.” Here, it would seem, was an archetypal response from a typical reactionary; the word ‘vulgarity’, in particular, was reactionary shorthand for a lack of taste, refinement, and good breeding and was commonly used to denigrate not only American culture but the shortcomings of bourgeois and working-class culture. However, in the thirteen intervening pages, Allen often forgot his elitism and included a series of entertaining vignettes in which he demonstrated with undisguised glee how certain words and phrases were used in the cities of the East and the saloons of the ‘Wild West.’ The ‘vulgarity’ of American English is condemned, but not before the audience has enjoyed a rollicking ride. This approach offered both writer and readers a safe, controlled form of transgression; boundaries are being pushed but never crossed.

The paradoxes present in the Cornhill’s study were noted by Freeman’s Journal, which observed that whilst the periodical was “rather unfriendly in its notice of ‘The American Language’... the smartness of the Yankee style is admitted in the fact that so much attention is given to it.” The use of the word ‘smartness’ here is significant and bears further reflection. The term was regularly used in connection with American culture. On one level, it was associated with the supposedly American characteristics of ingenuity and mental agility – an ability to invent new devices and social practices, and to live on one’s wits; a quintessentially modern sensibility. In terms of language, it was commonly used in connection with words such as ‘racy’, ‘fresh’, and ‘vigorously’ to capture the energy of America’s linguistic invention. However, the word also carried pejorative connotations. It suggested the smartness of the tall-talker and the con-artist; quick, streetwise, inventive, and attention grabbing, but lacking depth, integrity, honesty, and

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97 Freeman’s Journal and Commercial Advertiser, 28 September 1888: 3.
refinement.\(^9^8\) It neatly captured the contradictory nature of British attitudes towards America; a competing mixture of curiosity, admiration, and horror. It is difficult to discern which response most informed Freeman’s attitude towards the ‘Great American Language.’ However, the passages selected from the *Cornhill* offer some indication of what the paper, and its readers, found interesting. The majority of extracts focused on the philological background of American English and on samples of Americanisms in context; sections of the article in which the *Cornhill* attacked the American language were largely omitted or glossed over. Readers, it would seem, were more interested in encountering and exploring the American language than condemning it.

This pattern of exploration prevailing over rejection was repeated in a number of articles on Americanisms. A significant percentage avoided passing judgement on the validity of American English and adopted a disinterested, philological approach. Some attempted to describe the history of American English or locate the source of its words and phrases. For example, in 1871 *The Morning Post* printed a short article on ‘The American Language’ in which, after a brief introduction, over a hundred American words were listed alongside the language from which they were borrowed.\(^9^9\) This philological impulse inspired a number of other approaches. Some commentators, for example, were keen to identify American words which, although no longer spoken in Britain, actually belonged to ‘Old English’ and could be found in the work of Elizabethan poets or in Chaucer’s “well of English undefiled.”\(^1^0^0\) Other articles attempted to outline and account for regional differences in American English; “in New England,” informed *Cassell’s Family Magazine*, “everybody ‘guesses’, just as the New Yorker ‘reckons’, and the Western people ‘calculate.’”\(^1^0^1\) Many commentators focused their attention on comparing British and American expressions. “An American who is interested in a narrative or statement”, began one example from *Gentleman’s Magazine*:

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\(^9^9\) *The Morning Post*, 21 August 1871: 3.

\(^1^0^0\) *Pall Mall Gazette*, 12 July 1872: 12; *Pall Mall Gazette*, 6 March 1889: 3

\(^1^0^1\) Reprinted in *Hampshire Advertiser*, 11 June 1887: 7.
will say ‘Is that so?’ or simply ‘So!’ The expression ‘Possible!’ is sometimes but not often heard... The word ‘right’ is more frequently used than in England, and is used also in senses different from those understood in our English uses of the word. Thus the Americans say, ‘right here’ and ‘right there’, whereas an Englishman would say ‘just here’... The American use of the word ‘quit’ is peculiar. They do not limit the word, as we do, to the signification ‘take leave’... They generally use it as equivalent to ‘leave off’ or ‘stop... Thus the Americans say, ‘quit fooling’ for ‘leave off playing the fool’, ‘quit singing’, ‘quit laughing’, and so forth.  

Many articles abandoned any pretence of mounting a literary critique, or of conducting a scientific investigation, and opted instead to list as many Yankee words and phrases as possible. For example, in November 1892 the Evening Standard carried a piece entitled ‘Americanisms’ which was reprinted in at least three provincial newspapers. After a brief introductory sentence, the article launched into a long, and seemingly random, list of unusual American phrases:

An American lady who is supposed to be at home to her friends is said by her female help to be ‘to hum.” To wander about town aimlessly is to ‘transpoose,’ and what we call the best man at a wedding is named in the United States a ‘weddiner.’ An employe[sic] who receives a letter of dismissal from his employer is said to have ‘got his walking papers,’ and the book in which Transatlantic wine merchants register the name of slow-paying customers is known as the ‘tickler.’ A commercial traveller is a ‘drummer’, a person who is well-travelled and has seen many lands is said to have ‘seen the elephant,’ a student who works hard and sticks to his books is a ‘dig,’ one who forgets a thing is said to ‘disremember’ it, and a person in full dress is spoken of as a ‘dike.’ To ‘acknowledge the corn’ is to admit an imputation, to ‘bale one’s own boat’ to mind your own business, and to ‘go it baldheaded’ is to do a thing eagerly...  

It continued for several paragraphs, packing in a total of more than forty Americanisms. Little attempt was made to categorise or connect these phrases; the expression used when a congressman gets the better of another in debate (‘given him Jessie’) is mentioned in the same sentence as the phrase for a man jilted by a lady (‘got the mitten’). On only one occasion is the etymology of a word (‘gerrymander’) given; no reference was made to Standard English, and no attempt made to engage in debates over the validity or vulgarity of the American language. “Our

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102 From Gentleman’s Magazine, but reprinted in The Dundee Courier, 9 August 1881: 5.
object,” agreed the Glasgow Herald, “is not to vilify a language that is still growing, but only to point out a few of the myriad of newly-invented words.”

A similar article in Blackburn’s Weekly Standard and Express offered an even briefer introduction before the commencement of the list:

Here is a select assortment of American Slang from the ‘New Century’: If we are to be wide awake, we are enjoined to keep out ‘eyes skinned’; to ‘face the music’ is to meet an emergency... ‘Bone pit’ is their elegant metaphor for a cemetery; ‘on top of dirt’ is certainly charming for being on this side of the grave... ‘To paw the ivories’ is a charmingly realistic way of asking a pianist to ‘operate’ on her Erard Grand... ‘idea pot’ for head... ‘toothcarpenter’ for dentist; ‘drummer’ for commercial traveller; ‘lame duck’ for defaulting stockbroker...”

This extract was clipped from an essay by R. M. Sillard published in the monthly periodical, New Century Review. Tellingly, whilst Sillard includes many lively Americanisms in his essay, the Weekly Standard and Express clipped their extract from the paragraph in which these words were most concentrated, and edited out the author’s introductory sentence. They were not, in other words, interested in Sillard’s argument, but in providing their readers with a selection of the most entertaining and unusual American words.

The fact that British editors clipped Americanisms from monthly reviews and reprinted them in popular weeklies suggests that the reading public were, at the very least, receptive to encounters with Yankee slang. There are a number of ways in which we might interpret this popular appetite. Firstly, Americanisms were attractive to anybody who derived pleasure from encountering and investigating new words and phrases. The nineteenth century witnessed a significant growth in both amateur and professional lexicography. For anybody interested in how language develops – how it absorbs other languages, how it responds to its surroundings,

104 Glasgow Herald, 20 May 1876: 5.
105 The Weekly Standard, 19 August 1899: 3.
107 For studies of Victorian philology and lexicography see Christine C. Ferguson, Language Science and Popular Fiction in the Victorian Fin-de-Siècle (Aldershot, 2006); Lynda Mugglestone, Lost For Words: The Hidden History of the Oxford English Dictionary, (Yale, 2005); John R. Davis, The Victorians and Germany, (Bern, 2007), ch. 4; Susan Stark, ‘Behind Inverted Commas': translation and Anglo-German cultural relations in the nineteenth century, (Clevedon, 1999), ch. 4.
how individual words and phrases are coined – American English offered a fascinating example of
a language in the making.108 This philological interest in the American language was by no means
limited to scientific circles. The etymology of the American words and slang terms was discussed
in popular weekly newspapers as well as quarterly reviews. Indeed, the Hampshire Telegraph
began an article on ‘The American Language’ by addressing the philologists in its audience
directly, suggesting that they would “note with surprise that... [in America] there is no plain Mr.;
everybody is a judge, unless, indeed, he happens to be a sheriff or a colonel.”109 Others
newspapers, such as The Pall Mall Gazette, highlighted the word ‘philology’ in crossheads as part
of an unlikely strategy to attract readers, but one which carried considerable resonance at the
time.110 This scientific interest in American English was even the subject of jokes. A short comic
anecdote printed in the Cheshire Observer, for example, related the story of a British philologist
who was excited to discover an Americanism (‘mashed’) in the work of a Restoration dramatist.111

As well as attracting the curiosity of philologically-minded readers, Americanisms also
offered readers new insights into everyday American life and culture. In Sillard’s account of a
Broadway saloon, it is not his descriptions of the decor or the clientele that mark the location as
exotically American, but the strange language that fills the air:

If any of our male readers should find themselves in New York, let them enter one of those
much-frequented saloons near Broadway, a little before midnight, and they will find a large
room pretty well full of men and women seated at small tables discussing their refreshments... [Some are] busily engaged in executing orders such as these – “say, you, bring ‘two downs and an up’” followed by another, with “one spike and a misery,” then, in rapid
succession, others with “up and down,” “one brown stone,” “two pair,” “full hand,” and “a
pair of buildings.” You will be getting a little bewildered... as to the meaning of these calls,
when you will hear a voice near you call out “sit on a rock, and two red eyes.” While you are
wondering who it is that is so afflicted, another call of “red eye sour”... will greet your ear...
The next cry you will hear may be, “pair of nuts; make ‘em commodores,” “moonlight on the
lake,” and “pair of sleeve buttons.” “Ups” and “downs” follow rapidly, with “six large
brownstone fronts,” “three English basements,” “a bullock’s eye,” and “a Newtown pippin.

108 The Cornhill described American English as being in the ‘jelly-fish stage’ of its evolution.
109 Hampshire Telegraph and Sussex Chronicle, 3 November 1888: 11.
110 Pall Mall Gazette, 30 November 1880: 11.
111 Cheshire Observer, 31 March 1883: 3.
When an excited-looking nigger shouts out “one down with a razor,” you will naturally begin to feel a little uncomfortable...\textsuperscript{112}

Take away the Americanisms and this extract could easily have described a public house anywhere in Britain. Indeed, \textit{The Globe} newspaper argued that the power of Americanisms lay in their ability to ‘throw light’ on the “the national character and habits” of America.\textsuperscript{113} “The native energy of the people,” it argued:

has been constantly striking out fresh, characteristic forms of expression, and from any vocabulary of Americanisms we may gather hints of original ways of thinking, of new branches of industry, of busy intercourse by rail and ‘wire,’ of recurring changes in politics, and the awakening belief in a great national future.\textsuperscript{114}

These were not just new words, but carriers of a new spirit and identity, lending weight to Humboldt’s argument of a symbiotic link between language and national identity; that the vocabulary of a nation provides unique insights into the life of its citizens. Unlike \textit{Punch}, which sought to denigrate America by distorting its language, newspapers such as \textit{The Globe} gathered \textit{authentic} pieces of American English and invited their readers to explore a new world.

Americanisms offered Victorians more than just the pleasure of encountering and analysing new expressions. American words and phrases – particularly the ‘rambunctiously’ creative slang of the Wild West – had a uniquely entertaining quality. The adjectives used by the sympathetic school of journalists to describe Americanisms were chiefly words such as ‘amusing’, ‘entertaining’, ‘expressive’, ‘humorous’, ‘novel’, ‘charming’, ‘fresh’, and ‘racy.’ In an article – tellingly titled ‘Transatlantic Whimsicalities’ – Sillard reinforced the connection between Americanisms and humour. Having first made reference to the defining figure of American Humour, Sam Slick, he signalled that his intention was “simply to jot down some characteristic specimens of [our American Cousin’s] whimsicalities, with a view to illustrating the quaint humour

which has become stereotyped into their everyday life.”\(^{115}\) By ‘specimens of whimsicalities’, Sillard effectively meant samples of amusing American English. The remainder of his article presented a series of comic linguistic vignettes: we hear the banter of that New York saloon, including the peculiar names given to alcoholic drinks; we are presented with a series of comic ‘negroisms’; we sample the racy slang of the American press; learn of the American fondness for prefixes and inventive comic abbreviations; discover the amusing nicknames given to American states; encounter several entertaining examples of America’s notoriously indelicate street advertising.\(^{116}\) At every juncture, Sillard emphasised the amusing, novel, or charming quality of American English; only the presence of an advert for a quack medicine dealer on the wall of a cemetery (“If you would keep out of here – use Plantation Bitters”) was deemed to be “running the thing too far into the ground.”\(^{117}\) The *Evening Standard* placed a similar emphasis on the humorous nature of American English. “The invention and adaption of dialectic synonyms of the amusing order seems to be a national characteristic of the Transatlantic mind”, it observed, “[and] a good deal of *industry*, as well as *ingenuity*, has been displayed in this particular department of lingual eccentricity.”\(^{118}\) Even the *Cornhill*, which professed a dislike for Americanisms, conceded that Americans’ superior sense of humour gave their language “the little pinch of salt that keeps it from falling into the utterly putrid condition.”\(^{119}\) This recognition of American *industry* and *ingenuity* is significant, and recalls the concept of the ‘laughter of good fellowship’ developed in Chapter Three. Whilst British newspaper audiences were unquestionably encouraged to laugh at Americanisms, this laughter was not necessarily directed against the United States. Rather than mock the American bending of Standard English, a significant number of Victorians were laughing in celebration of the country’s linguistic creativity.

\(^{118}\) The Newcastle Weekly Courant, 26 November 1892: 2
\(^{119}\) Grant Allen, ‘The Great American Language’: 377.
Adopting the American Voice

In an 1895 letter to *The Academy* on the subject of Americanisms, Scottish folklorist Andrew Lang argued that he had “never been able to see why Americans should not use Americanisms. It is a free country, and has a right to develop its own language.” However, this seemingly generous concession had a sting in its tail. “As long as they bud and blossom in *America only*,” he continued, “they are of mere philological interest to us; but when they begin to *invade our language*, like the American weed in our waters, surely we may, inoffensively, try to check their profusion?”

Lang’s remarks point towards an important boundary in the British relationship with American English. For reactionary observers, the mere existence of American English was a matter of concern. However, as the previous sections of this chapter demonstrate, a significant number of critics, philologists, and newspaper readers echoed Lang’s introductory remarks; “even in the opinion of poor islanders,” summarised the *Daily News*, “an Americanism has a perfect right to exist.” Indeed, as we have seen, there is compelling evidence to suggest that many Victorians enjoyed deciphering the amusing dialects of the Wild West frontier and laughing at inventive American slang. However, even when readers were invited to indulge these appetites, an important cultural safeguard often remained in place. As long as the language was contained within its native print culture – whether in American humour columns, local colour stories, or clippings from American journalists – American English could be dealt with at arm’s length. Just as anthropologists might live alongside and investigate tribal societies whilst preserving their identity as Western scientists, so too could aspiring philologists explore the American language, safe in the knowledge that they were only *observing* a curious foreign culture. Similarly, cultural critics were generally willing to accept the presence of the American language, so long as it appeared exclusively within the country’s own literature. In the work of Twain or Lowell an Americanism could be justified, even enjoyed, as an authentic expression of American character; if the same

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phrase appeared in the work of a British novelist, its inauthenticity was likely to draw immediate fire. Finally, whilst readers of newspaper jokes were given license to enjoy Yankee slang, the genre of humour also allowed them to laugh it away as a form of harmless, transatlantic whimsicality. As long as American English was contained within these fields, well-labelled and carefully demarcated, it could always be controlled and mediated as a foreign curiosity – journalists, readers, and literary critics could engage with the language without transgressing codes of Standard English or compromising their national, social, or professional identities.

However, as the case of ‘skedaddle’ demonstrates, this buffer between British and American culture was far from impermeable. Within weeks of the word’s arrival in Britain it had been enthusiastically adopted by a wide range of Victorians, including the slang lovers of London clubland, the humourists of *Punch* and *Fun*, provincial and metropolitan journalists, businessmen, advertisers, theatre managers, and racehorse owners. Rather than observe this fragment of American English from an appropriate distance, a significant number of Victorians elected to integrate the word into their own vocabulary. Hundreds of other American words and phrases made a similar journey during the second half of the nineteenth century. ‘Cocktail’, for example, quickly established itself in the Victorian vocabulary during the final quarter of the nineteenth century. It was initially used to describe the mixed alcoholic drinks popular in the United States (and sold at London’s fashionable ‘American Bars’), but by the 1890s the term was used more generally by journalists as a synonym for ‘mixture’. Other Americanisms entered political discourse. During the 1870s, British politicians began to accuse their rivals of being ‘carpet-baggers’ – a Far Western term for a fraudulent banker which was subsequently repurposed in the Southern states to describe exploitative Northern speculators.\(^{122}\) In British discourse, it was used

\(^{122}\) See for example *Pall Mall Gazette*, 20 April 1875: 12; *York Herald*, 21 October 1884: 5; *Glasgow Herald*, 14 October 1885: 7; *Northern Echo*, 6 December 1884: 3; *Ipswich Journal*, 17 February 1888: 4; *Sheffield and Rotherham Independent*, 23 May 1892: 4; *Reynolds’s Newspaper*, 21 July 1895: 3; *Daily News*, 19 July 1895: 4; *The Standard*, 10 October 1900: 2.
to describe opportunistic politicians who sought election in districts with which they had no real ties.

In other cases, the American sense of a word subverted the British. In Britain, the word ‘reliable’ described something trustworthy (as in a trustworthy source of information), whilst the American version referred to a product or service which was dependable or consistently good in quality. By 1887, Cadbury’s was using ‘reliable’ in the American sense in advertisements which offered the public “strong, reliable cocoa”.123 These examples represent only a tiny fraction of Americanisms which successfully made the transition into everyday discourse. This is not to suggest that all Americanisms managed to take hold. The phrase ‘chin music’ (meaning idle or boastful talk), for example, was used on several occasions by British journalists but never captured the public’s imagination.124 Despite these occasional failures, it is clear that by the end of the nineteenth century the American language had transcended the boundaries of its native print culture and was exercising a growing influence on British writing and speech.

The press was central to this process of linguistic exchange. As we have seen, newspapers were key players in the importation and circulation of American English. Every time a Victorian editor reprinted a choice snippet of American print culture he helped to transport new fragments of the American language across the Atlantic and circulate them amongst a wide readership. More importantly, the press helped to facilitate the assimilation of American English into British discourse. As the case of ‘skedaddle’ demonstrates, this transition could be sparked by an article clipped from the American press which contained an unusual new expression – if a word was interesting enough to capture the public’s attention it could, in modern parlance, ‘go viral’ and quickly spread. However, when this transition was not so instantaneous, the press performed an additional role. Its power as an Anglo-American ‘contact zone’ rested, to a significant extent, on

124 Belfast News-Letter, 14 June 1881: 7; Leicester Chronicle, 20 September 1884: 8; Western Mail, 6 April 1893: 3; Illustrated Police News, 18 November 1899: 4.
its ability to operate as an intermediary cultural space; to act as a stepping-stone between British and American discourse. It was here that the buffer between British and American culture was at its most permeable – American words, ideas, and modes of expression encountered less resistance in the press than in other areas of Victorian discourse. In part, this receptiveness to American English stemmed from the industry’s close professional ties with the United States. British editors and journalists came into regular contact with their American colleagues, either in person or through a regular exchange of print. Those who were receptive to the American language had ample opportunities to borrow from the distinctive linguistic style and vocabulary of the country’s journalism. Even those who steadfastly resisted the tide of Americanisation found themselves tested by regular contact with American English – eventually, whether by accident or design, even the most vocal defenders of the Queen’s English might drop their guard and allow an Americanism to creep in. Once an Americanism permeated British discourse in this fashion, two things happened: it influenced a greater number of readers and assumed a new air of cultural legitimacy. Over time, if repeatedly used by British journalists, its status as an exotic and perhaps even vulgar import gradually changed and it was incorporated into everyday usage.

The popular press was a particularly effective gateway for American English. Unlike essayists and writers of literary fiction, journalists working for newspapers such as Lloyds, Reynolds’s, Tit-Bits, or the Hampshire Telegraph were not professionally dependent on the validation of literary and cultural critics. Indeed, the growing distinction between ‘literature’ and journalism which was largely fostered by elite commentators during this period, left journalists free to pursue their own style of writing and often to do so in active opposition to the established style. If British novelists elected to use Americanisms they could expect a damaging public excoriation at the hands of literary critics; if a writer used the same expressions in a submission to a monthly periodical, such as the Contemporary Review, their intellectual and cultural credibility would be undermined; yet the same Americanisms would typically pass unnoticed if they were used by a reporter for a popular provincial weekly. These newspapers did not aspire to embody
an Arnoldian definition of culture, and made no attempt to contribute to the literary canon; they
simply sought to entertain their readers. As a result, contributors to these papers were freer to
experiment with words and phrases like Americanisms, British slang terms, or local dialects.

This is not to suggest that journalists working for the popular press had complete
freedom to frame their own language. In fact, as Martin Conboy argues, the commercial success
of a popular newspaper depended on its ability to create and maintain an ‘authentic’ linguistic
tone – to speak in a voice which was engaging, accessible, and, most importantly, in tune with the
language and culture of its readers. “[T]he language of newspapers”, Conboy argues:

has always encapsulated what would sell to audiences and how information could best be
packaged and presented to achieve this commercial end at any particular time. Newspapers have therefore always attempted to fit into the tastes of their readerships
and sought ways to echo these within their own idiom, thereby reconstructing the
‘original’ audience in the process. Conboy’s argument that newspapers use a “distinctive language” in order to “give a coherent
editorial expression to readers’ tastes” has important implications for the final section of this
study. If the language of popular Victorian newspapers was, as he suggests, closely linked to the
language of their audience, then the study of one will help to reveal new insights into the
workings of the other. The way Victorian journalists drew upon the style and vocabulary of
American English allows us explore how they their readers might have done the same. This is not
to suggest that the written prose employed by the popular press mirrored the spoken, or even
written, language of its audience exactly. Sophisticated skills were needed to produce this kind of
accessible and engaging writing. Moreover, it is important to remember that the complex
textuality of the press required journalists to communicate in different registers as they moved
from one sub-genre of journalism to another. By the same token, readers were not uniform in
their tastes or responses. To suggest that the readers of a bestselling national paper like Lloyds
Weekly News or Tit-Bits all communicated in precisely the same way is clearly absurd.

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125 Martin Conboy, The Language of Newspapers: 1. For a nuanced discussion of ‘authenticity’ and the
popular press, see Martin Conboy, The Press and Popular Culture: 15-18.
Nevertheless, to borrow once again from the history of mentalities, the language used by the popular press indicates modes of expression which were, at the very least, *possible* within the social and cultural world of its readers.

Victorian journalists elected to use Americanisms in a variety of contexts. They appeared most frequently in articles which engaged directly with America itself. When Victorian journalists reported news from the United States they routinely used American nouns such as ‘patrolman’ and ‘sidewalk’ in place of British equivalents like ‘policeman’ or ‘pavement’.\(^\text{127}\) It was by no means contentious to describe the objects, inhabitants and institutions of a country in its own vernacular – journalists were equally quick to refer to a French beach as a ‘*plage*’ – but the fact that they elected to use American words in preference to British alternatives is significant. It indicates a willingness to engage, however tentatively, with the language of America. This use of Americanisms was entirely voluntary and by no means uniform across the press. Whilst many British journalists chose to describe unruly Californian youths as ‘hoodlums’, others stuck to the Queen’s English and referred to them as “idle and dissolute ruffians”\(^\text{128}\). Indeed, if the success of a newspaper depended on its ability to mirror the everyday vernacular of its readers, then the use of easily intelligible British words in favour of unfamiliar Americanisms seems, at first glance, to be a prudent commercial decision. The fact however that many popular journalists elected to use Americanisms suggests strongly that these words carried their own appeal; that the use of American English was attractive to both journalists and readers.

British journalists used Americanisms to inject a dash of Yankee humour into their copy. This technique was particularly apparent when they elected to borrow colourful American expressions and slang terms and use them in situations which had no connection to the United States. For example, in an article about Uganda a British journalist playfully argued that “the

\(^{127}\) For ‘patrolman’ see: *Reynolds’s Newspaper*, 16 November 1873: 5.

French Press, as usual, has, to use an expressive Americanism, gone off at half cock.”\(^{129}\) Similarly, when the *Dundee Courier* published a short news story about a runaway horse-and-cart which had been causing chaos in the city, they described it as moving “at a speed that would... have ‘licked creation.'”\(^{130}\) These were not isolated incidents. A journalist for the *Leeds Mercury* described aspiring art collectors as going “about the world with their ‘eyes peeled’”; the *Morning Post* claimed that a playwright had “‘struck oil’” with his latest production; the London correspondent of the *Liverpool Mercury* reported that a temperance activist had ‘gone the whole hog’ in his latest campaign; and *Berrow’s Worcester Journal* informed its readers that a much anticipated Reform Demonstration had, “to use an Americanism, ‘gone off in a fizzee.'”\(^{131}\) It would have been straightforward for British journalists to report these stories using Standard English; to claim that the French press was ‘impulsive’ or ‘premature’ in its reaction to events in Uganda, and that a runaway cart was simply traveling at a high speed. The fact that they elected to use imaginative American terms is indicative of their need to sustain readers’ attention by communicating their copy in a lively and engaging fashion. Predictably, ‘expressive’ Americanisms were drawn upon most frequently by journalists working for newspapers which courted a popular audience.\(^{132}\)

It is also notable that these journalists chose American, rather than British, colloquialisms. It would have been perfectly feasible for the *Liverpool Mercury’s* London correspondent to report that the temperance campaigner had ‘left no stone unturned’ instead of ‘gone the whole hog’. It could be argued that these Americanisms were simply fitter for purpose; that they were used whenever they communicated a journalist’s ideas most effectively, or were calculated to produce

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\(^{129}\) *Yorkshire Herald*, 1 June 1892: 6.

\(^{130}\) *Dundee Courier*, 20 April 1893: 3.

\(^{131}\) *Leeds Mercury*, 8 June 1887: 5; *Morning Post*, 28 December 1886: 2; *Liverpool Mercury*, 15 August 1891: 5; *Berrow’s Worcester Journal*, 26 July 1884: 4. It is unclear precisely what ‘gone off in a fizzee’ meant. It is most likely a misprint, or misuse, of the Americanism ‘to fizzle out’.

\(^{132}\) This is not to suggest, however, that reporters for high-brow London dailies and contributors to monthly reviews never succumbed to the temptation of using American slang – *The Times*, *The Morning Post*, *The Saturday Review*, and numerous similar publications all made occasional use of Americanisms.
bigger laughs. Yet there was more at work here than practical considerations of style. The social function of Americanisms needs to be read in relation to the wider and more complex cultural politics of the late-Victorian period. When Victorian journalists drew upon the American language they did not simply subvert dominant codes of Standard English but invoked the spirit of America with all of its social, cultural, and political connotations. The way in which journalists and their readers negotiated this process – the manner in which they chose to adopt and direct an ‘American voice’ – had important ramifications for the formation of their social and professional identities.

Patrick Joyce’s influential work on nineteenth-century dialect literature has demonstrated how non-standard forms of English played a pivotal role in the formation and articulation of identity.133 In the case of dialect literature, this process centred on the celebration of working-class characters and traditions via the medium of an authentic local vernacular – what Joyce terms the ‘People’s English’. “The ‘people’s English’, he argues, “[was] a class assertion of the integrity of the people’s own language and culture against the condescension of the higher classes.”134 His work argues for the symbolic power of language and demonstrates how individuals, social groups and professional writers in the Victorian period all sought to define their identities by subverting dominant codes of Standard English. We can approach the use of American English by British journalists in a similar vein – interpreting the adoption of an American voice, no matter how tentatively, as a deliberate act of identity formation. It is important to recognise, of course, that the social function of the ‘People’s English’ was very different to that of American English. The ‘People’s English’ claimed to be deeply rooted in local tradition; its power, Joyce argues, lay in its ability to embody and articulate the ‘true identity’ of working-class communities in ways which could not be done using the Queen’s English. In truth, of course,

dialect literature was a highly contrived literary genre that constructed a particular sense of ‘authentic’ tradition for its readers. In its domestic setting, American English performed a similar role. Local colour writing and dialect humour played an important role in the formation of both regional and national American identities. However, when American English was cut from its roots and transferred to foreign soil, its claim to represent the ‘true identity’ of the people who used it was inevitably lost. Rather than claiming to embody authentic local identities, it now evoked foreign ideas and traditions. More specifically, it evoked America and all that the country represented in the late-Victorian imagination: its championing of popular over elite culture; its distinctive wit and irreverence; its restless energy and ‘go-ahead’ attitude; its rush towards modernity; its abandonment of tradition. For some conservative British readers, this posed a challenge to Britain’s social, cultural, economic, and political identity and was resisted; for others it offered a radical and highly effective critique of the established order.

Conclusion

In 1927 the film critic, G. A. Atkinson, complained that British public had begun to “talk America, think America, and dream America.” He laid the blame for this Americanisation of the British imagination squarely at the feet of Hollywood. Imported American movies, he argued, had come to dominate British cinemas to such an extent that audiences had ceased to speak the dialects of British English and sounded like “temporary American citizens.” Atkinson’s alarmist response to the Americanisation of the English Language has been echoed by British commentators ever since – in 2010, for example, the Daily Mail’s website invited readers to express their “horror at the

135 See: Richard Brodhead, Culture of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America, (Chicago, 1993); Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse, Writing out of Place: Regionalism, Women, and American Literary Culture, (Champaign, 2005); Nicolas S. Witschi, Traced of Gold: California’s Natural Resources and the Claim to Realism in Western American Literature, (Alabama, 2002).
way British English is being overwhelmed by a tidal wave of mindless Americanisms.”  

Whenever these debates resurface, anxious commentators invariably make reference to a supposed golden age in which Britain’s language was not under threat from America. Sometimes they look to their own childhood; at other times they make reference to Chaucer’s “well of English undefiled”, but most frequently they settle on the Victorian period. Here, it is often imagined, was a time in which Britain was able to assert its linguistic dominance over the English-speaking world. The idea of a respectable Victorian gentleman using American slang jars with our most enduring preconceptions about Victorian culture and identity.

And yet, as we have seen in this chapter, the American voice occupied a far more pervasive presence in Victorian discourse than might previously have been imagined. Orthographic renderings of American dialects were circulated around the country through serialised fiction and joke columns. Words and phrases drawn from America’s burgeoning new vocabulary reached mass audiences in Britain after being imported in the clippings of American print culture. Articles discussing the meaning and etymology of these words were published in monthly reviews before being clipped out and reprinted by editors of popular newspapers. Many of these words were subsequently assimilated into British discourse, often through the work of Victorian journalists. Some literary critics, satirists, and cultural commentators reacted to these linguistic imports with hostility and used them to denigrate America and assert the superiority of a British national identity and culture structured around the idea of the Queen’s English. However, many Victorians appear to have responded in a more positive manner. Philologically inclined readers were captivated by the prospect of studying the formation of a new language and investigating its etymological roots. Others found enjoyment in the inventiveness and ‘racy’ humour of American slang, or appreciated its ability to capture the distinctive flavours of American life. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, an increasing number of Victorian

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journalists and readers were beginning to borrow from the style and vocabulary of American popular culture and use the American voice to articulate new social and professional identities. Long before the sound of Hollywood starlets echoed through Britain’s cinemas we can see Victorian newspaper readers beginning to ‘talk America’.
Historians of twentieth-century popular culture have pinpointed the publication of W. T. Stead’s *The Americanization of the World* in 1902 as a watershed moment in transatlantic relations. Stead’s prediction that the spread of American culture, commodities, and ideas would be the “trend of the twentieth century” is routinely cited by historians as an example of a forward thinking Victorian who recognised the extent to which America would go on to shape Britain’s future. Here, it would seem, was a text that anticipated the impending arrival of Hollywood, McDonalds, and Elvis Presley. The bulk of Stead’s book however was not devoted to the new century, but to the old. Despite his well-known interest in clairvoyance, he was less concerned with gazing into the future, and more with cataloguing the social, cultural, economic, and political advances that the United States had made over the course of the last century. Crucially, he painted a portrait of *fin-de-siècle* Britain in which the spectre of Americanisation did not sit on the horizon, but loomed large over the present. His vision was constructed in response to a new relationship with America that had been taking shape in Britain since the 1860s.

The decades following the American Civil War witnessed a significant thickening of connections between Britain and the United States. Improvements in steamship travel, the growth of a transatlantic tourist industry, increased levels of transatlantic migration, touring writers and performers, and the transatlantic exchange of literary texts all worked to draw the two countries together. However, it was the popular press that emerged in this period as the key

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contact zone between the Old World and the New. The timing of Stead’s journalistic career allowed him to experience these developments first hand. When he entered the profession in 1871, he expressed disappointment at the failure of British newspapers to advance the cause of Anglo-American brotherhood. The readers of perfunctory telegrams stating the price of gold, the arrival of a steamship, or the election of a new senator were, he argued, largely ignorant of everyday American life and culture. By 1881, when Stead moved to London to work at the *Pall Mall Gazette*, this situation had started to change. The emergence of a competitive market in transatlantic telegraphy now allowed a greater volume of information to pass between Britain and the United States. In-depth American news stories crossed the Atlantic within hours, whilst daily reports from foreign correspondents kept British readers abreast of the country’s political machinations and latest society gossip. This increase in the volume of transatlantic correspondence reshaped British perceptions of Atlantic time and space. Only a few years earlier, it had taken more than a fortnight to send a message to America and receive a reply; now, it seemed possible for the two countries to converse like next door neighbours. Whilst idealistic predications of a shared Anglo-American consciousness never quite came to pass – even the internet has failed to conquer the final problem of timezones – the everyday cultural discourses of Britain and America were brought into a new state of temporal alignment. The last hours of a dying president were now monitored in London and New York almost simultaneously. As well as fostering a new sense of Anglo-American communion, this heightened state of connection propelled America into new areas of Victorian life. Bulletins from the New York stock exchange allowed the destabilising energy of American modernity to penetrate British life uniting British and American readers in a shared community of constant change and crisis.

This high-speed transatlantic traffic was supplement by a slower, more circuitous system of transatlantic reprinting in which choice snippets of American print culture, extracted and recycled by exchange editors working for publications such as *Tit-Bits*, were circulated through both metropolitan and provincial papers. The most pervasive textual genre to circulate in this
fashion was the American newspaper joke. By the 1880s, columns of American humour clipped from the American press were a familiar feature in many of the country’s bestselling papers. At a time when British newspaper editors scrambled to meet the tastes of an emerging reading public, many of them introduced Yankee humour columns as part of a broader strategy to attract and retain readers. There are several ways in which we might account for the popularity of these texts. On the one hand, they offered British audiences the opportunity to snigger at the eccentricities of American life and thereby reinforced Britain’s sense of cultural superiority. Alternatively, it is possible to read the British appetite for American humour as part of what this study terms the ‘laughter of good fellowship’. At a time when a ‘sense of humour’ became a prized character trait, there is much evidence to suggest that British laughter at American jokes was complimentary rather than aggressive. Finally, as well as making audiences laugh, these snippets of American humour played an important role in shaping British perceptions of everyday American life. The landscapes, lifestyles, characters, and culture of America were delivered to readers in weekly collections of bite-sized comic vignettes; fragments of Americana that gradually accumulated into a rich cultural sediment.

Along with other clippings from American print culture, these texts acted as vehicles for the importation and diffusion of a distinctive American voice. Orthographic renderings of American dialects and the racy vocabulary of the American frontier arrived in Britain via news clippings, serialised fiction and humour columns. These words and phrases were recirculated by British journalists and, over time, the most adaptable among them were gradually assimilated into British discourse. Whilst the defenders of the Queen’s English often reacted to these linguistic imports with hostility, many Victorian writers, commentators, and readers responded in a more positive fashion. They found enjoyment in the inventiveness and ‘racy’ humour of American slang and appreciated its ability to capture the distinctive flavours of American life. Crucially, rather than admire the language from a safe cultural distance, an increasing number of Victorians began to assimilate aspects of this American voice. Long before the appropriation of American slang
gave shape to the rebellion of post-Second World War teenagers, Victorian journalists and their readers drew upon the country’s distinctive style and vocabulary to articulate new social and professional identities.

This study has contributed to three key areas of academic scholarship. Firstly, whilst the once-insular field of American Studies has now begun to explore the possibilities of transnationalism, the international circulation of nineteenth-century American mass culture remains largely underexplored. Scholars such as Robert Rydell and Rob Kroes have examined the European tours of Buffalo Bill, the circulation of American photographs, and the country’s participation in international exhibitions, whilst Paul Giles and Meredith McGill have examined a range of transatlantic literary encounters and exchanges.3 Whilst these studies have made an important contribution to the field, they have neglected what this thesis has identified as the most powerful vehicle for Anglo-American cultural exchange to operate in this period – the press. It formed the key transatlantic contact zone; a textual borderland in which the cultural products of Britain and America were exchanged, debated, resisted, and assimilated. It was the press that first allowed the fruits of American mass culture to reach a mass audience on this side of the Atlantic – and, unlike the one-off spectacles of Buffalo Bill, to do so on a daily basis.

This process of Americanization has important implications for our understanding of nineteenth and twentieth century history. Most studies of British attitudes to America in the nineteenth century still cling to an enduring mythology based predominantly on a narrow set of readings from literary figures such as Dickens and Trollope. Their largely negative comments on American society and culture have been taken as representative of wider public attitudes and values, but there is considerable evidence to suggest that many British readers developed a genuine appetite for the everyday Americana they found in the popular press of the late nineteenth century. This divide between elite commentators who tended to denigrate American

culture and popular consumers who welcomed it formed part of a wider late-Victorian debate over high and low culture, a debate that has continued to inform the idea of Americanization in the twentieth century. Evidence of this widespread Victorian fascination with America establishes the United States alongside Empire as a key external influence on Victorian culture. Much has been written on Victorian encounters with colonial culture, particularly in terms of India and Africa, but relatively little has been said about similar Victorian explorations of America. This study has sought to open out this surprisingly neglected field. Tracking a British fascination with America further back than simply the post-Second World War generation, or indeed the jazz and cinema audiences of the roaring twenties, not only helps to establish a greater time depth, but uncovers the roots of this enduring and often troubled love affair. It supports the idea that modern American culture was genuinely popular with British consumers at a time when British power was at its height. It was, therefore, not something foisted on a weakened Britain and Europe during the twentieth century when America had become the new global superpower.

Finally, this study has demonstrated the potential of digital research methodologies. In particular, it has highlighted two contrasting ways in which keyword searches allow us to interrogate archives of nineteenth-century print culture on both a large scale and with newfound precision. Firstly, it has embraced Franco Moretti’s concept of ‘distant reading’ a rudimentary form of ‘culturomic’ analysis to quantify and visualise broad patterns of cultural change. We have seen for example, how it is possible to search the 19th Century British Library Newspaper database for all articles in which the word ‘America’ appeared within ten words of ‘Competition’ and then plot the results onto a graph (figs. 2.1, 2.2, 2.3). Whilst it is dangerous to place too much interpretative weight on this relatively crude form of cultural analysis, the patterns that emerge shed valuable light on changing place of America in the Victorian imagination. This ‘macro’ approach to digital archives has been complemented by the use of ‘micro’ methodologies which track the transnational and intertextual movement of words, texts, and ideas. In Chapter Three, for example, a joke about an American undertaker is tracked around America and eventually into
North Wales. A similar approach is used in Chapter Four to track the importation and diffusion of American words and phrases such as ‘skedaddle’.

Like the febrile signs of American modernity tracked in this study, digital methodologies are operating in a web of constant change. New databases and updated interfaces are continually redefining the possibilities of our research. In a matter of years, the rapid march of technological change may leave the specific techniques developed in this study looking relatively rudimentary. Nevertheless, the core values underpinning its methodologies will be of enduring relevance. Online archives allow us to envision history in new ways; to ask new questions, make new connections and develop new interpretations. In this case, they have facilitated a re-examination of the place of America in late-Victorian culture and allowed us to trace the crucial role that the press played as a powerful transatlantic contact zone. There is much still to be discovered about nineteenth-century popular culture and its relationship to America – the role of tourism, popular entertainment, and sport stand out as particularly fruitful areas of further enquiry – but whatever the theme, the creative potential of these new technologies allows us to explore the everyday past with a new sense of anticipation.
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