

Christopher Flynn. *Americans in British Literature, 1770-1832: A Breed Apart*. Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2008. 162pp.

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The American Revolution was a major moment not just for the nation that became the United States of America, but also for the British Empire from which it seceded. Prior to 1776, British authors depicted an ever-expanding empire under the royal crown, an imposing and unstoppable force that was to be the result of centuries of progress and development and the pinnacle of western civilization. Imperialism in the New World was destined to solidify this endeavor, and colonial success designed to enhance British glory and power. But the Declaration of Independence and the military success of George Washington put a damper on those hopes, forcing Britons to reconsider what their empire's identity and future really was. As a result, rather than being an expansion of the British "self", Americans were now to be depicted as a foreign "other" and invoked only in contrast to what an ideal citizen constituted.

Christopher Flynn's fascinating and concise history of British literary depictions of America during the half-century following the American Revolution narrates these poignant ideological shifts, adding another chapter to the evolving "special relationship" between America and Britain. Flynn outlines four main – if fluid – types of British depictions of America during this period. First was an emphasis on the two nations' "political relationship as an emotional one that could survive technical dissolution" (4); many writers were not ready to dissolve sympathetic bonds with their now separated colonists and sought to maintain literary connections when political association was impossible. Second, British writers looked to America as a location of "empty space" welcoming utopian visions, and many utilised that space – even if only metaphorically – to establish their ideal civilisation. Third was the notion of America as an escape from epochal boundaries, where ideals of civilisation and savagery commingled and period structures were transcended, providing a new age of humankind. And finally, the fourth and perhaps most long-

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lasting category was the depiction of Americans as “a breed apart,” a new and exciting opportunity for ethnographic study. This last grouping has been the most influential, as it includes numerous travel writings prepared by amateur anthropologists seeking to depict Americans in a way that validated their view of Britain.

Center to Flynn’s framework is the notion of “time”, and how the depiction of time – both spatial and chronological – reveals deeper tensions within an ideology. In the first of Flynn’s four categories, “time” is something to be mourned, as physical distance and political separateness make impossible the sympathetic bonds of the past. In Flynn’s third category, conversely, time is something to paradoxically both frown upon and embrace, depending on the author. Frowned upon, because the American citizens were “in danger of degenerating in a world where the mixture of savagery with civility threatened to rewrite their identity” (82), implying that this backward movement in civilized time threatened social order; embraced, because for some the American setting allowed the possibility to transcend time and escape the problems and dilemmas that the modern world encountered, enabling a metaphoric “Eden” outside of the present.

As interesting and informative as Flynn’s narrative is, its framework suffers at times from its intrinsic limitations. First and foremost, non-English authors are mostly absent. What was supposed to be an examination of “Americans in British Literature” would be more accurately depicted as “Americans in *English* Literature.” This nuance and different approach is significant, because authors from different parts of the empire held different views of the empire. For example, did Scottish and Irish authors hold more sympathy toward – and perhaps hope to emulate – the American colonies? Or, on the other hand, did Scottish and Irish writers use the American example to distance themselves from other would-be empire rebels and reaffirm their position within the Empire’s scope? Such questions lie outside of Flynn’s framework, even if the book’s title and introduction imply otherwise.

Scholars of early America are likely to become frustrated with Flynn’s misrepresentations of America, but this confusion is likely a result of the fact that his subjects misrepresented America to an extraordinary degree. Flynn furthermore argues that it would be both impossible and unnecessary to determine the accuracy of British representations of America, mostly because such an approach would act as a red herring in relation to the larger issue: what do these representations reveal about

their authors? Thus, the “America” depicted in the numerous texts is not the subject but rather the lens through which to understand a remarkably unstable and evolving British nation struggling to reorient its understanding of an empire in transition.

So, if this book isn’t therefore about America *per se*, does it still have use for the scholar of America? Yes, on at least two accounts. First and foremost, it demonstrates the fact that America was not alone during the period in using exaggerated depictions of a foreign “other” to create a tenuous national identity. Rather, Americans were taking part in a broader tradition of international misrepresentations and caricatures during a tumultuous period of ideological tumult, where every nation took turns in acting as those misrepresenting others as well as in those being caricatured. The too-often ideological westward motion of Atlantic history ignores the role that the image of America played during the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries. Second, from a more practical standpoint, Flynn’s work reminds us not to always unquestioningly accept accounts of the early American republic by foreign visitors. As common or easy as it is to rely on Francis Trollope or Charles Dickens for an understanding of what antebellum America was really like, it must be remembered that the numerous British visitors to the newly established United States were not the objective anthropologists we wish they were but instead participants in Britain’s national struggle to define what “British” really meant – a struggle that required the depiction of an “other” against which to create a “self”.