

# Introduction

*Janet Beer and Bridget Bennett*

The celebrated description of Britain and America as two nations divided by a common language suggests the limits, at both ends, of the relationship between the two countries. It is a relationship that has received a good deal of critical attention, yet the collaborations, collisions, friendships, mutual admiration or hostilities between individual British and American writers and their cultural preoccupations has not been an area of much study. The idea of a special relationship between the United States and Great Britain is one that falls in and out of favour; for instance, the notion that there was a particular affinity between nations had currency during the 1980s when their respective political leaders had similar ideologies and, it was frequently claimed, a close personal rapport. Since the ending of Ronald Reagan's and Margaret Thatcher's terms of office, the question of whether the Anglo-American special relationship still flourishes or, indeed, ever had much valence, is frequently raised, never more so than with the election of President George W. Bush, a president who started his term of office with rather less interest in the global than in the local. In the first flush of the new presidency the Spanish-speaking Bush suggested a renewed interest in the southern and northern borders of the United States. Britain meanwhile, repeatedly debated the thorny issue of its relationship to continental Europe, and within Europe, a new generation of political leaders has brought with it fresh ideas of where and whether alliances should be forged and maintained. The geo-political map has registered substantial changes in the last two decades of the twentieth century and the United States, seemingly, has been out of kilter with the international mood. For a period it seemed as if the special relationship had foundered. The events of 11 September 2001 have changed all that. At the time of writing, the revived and newly strengthened Anglo-American relationship is being redrawn as the Blair government continues to play an active

role in support of President Bush's call for an international response to terrorism. The special relationship appears to have re-emerged with a new agenda founded on and generating both accord and contention.

The connection between the former colony and colonial power is one that has always been complex and it is not our intention here to track its history. The aim of this collection of essays is, rather, to consider a series of cultural and literary relationships that took place across the Atlantic (and often despite it). These suggest that, in cultural terms at least, the relationship between Britain and the United States has been a particularly productive one, whether in antagonism or amity. The eleven essays in this volume reveal a set of borrowings, shared considerations and preoccupations, rivalries and friendships that took place between creative writers and cultural commentators on both sides of the Atlantic from the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries. This was a period in which transatlantic communications and transport were transformed, allowing for an increasing internationalisation of intellectual activity. What the essays reveal is the extent to which national boundaries were not an inhibiting factor for the exchange of ideas or the currency of issues. What they demonstrate, individually and together, is a series of dynamic cultural exchanges that challenge models of nationhood and reveal a significant internationalism that was at work within the field of literary culture. In effect, the essays allow us to re-consider definitions of what constituted nationhood over the period covered by the collection.

These essays have grown out of both pedagogical concerns and recent trends within scholarship that have made transatlantic, Atlanticist, and circum-Atlantic approaches to cultural and literary studies some of the most productive and exciting of recent years. They are engaged with a variety of Anglo-American conjunctions. These extend from actual and intellectual encounters, readings or re-readings, professional and national rivalries and parallel activities. Some individuals only met each other on the printed page, some met face to face. Figures who should have met in person, like Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Sarah Grand, working with the same people and ideas but on different sides of the Atlantic, meet only in these pages. Similarly, Edith Wharton and Virginia Woolf expressed their attitudes of mutual suspicion in letters to many of their friends but never to each other. In contrast, the remarkable intellectual affinity between Gertrude Stein and Alfred North Whitehead, at a crucial moment in the development of their literary and philosophical careers, provides a model of a productive Anglo-American 'special relationship', a description that can also be applied to the extraordinary sympathy which developed

between the members of the Bolton Whitman Fellowship and those who were in close association with the poet in the United States.

The nature of the relationships examined in these essays range between the metaphorical and the actual, but they also reveal the intricate nexus of correspondences or connections which existed outside the main pairings investigated by contributors and which will bear further investigation. Take the case of George Eliot, Harriet Beecher Stowe and Charlotte Brontë, who were brought together through communications both earthly and other-worldly. Stowe wrote to Eliot describing a long 'conversation' she had held (via the planchette) with the spirit of Charlotte Brontë at a seance she had attended in America. This might, for obvious reasons, be said to constitute a relationship that was certainly special yet it is only one (though a sensational one) of many that existed in spiritual if not material form. Needless to say, Eliot found it highly implausible and wrote to Stowe to tell her so.

The essays here are presented chronologically, but there are strong thematic links throughout. Some essays are concerned with the influence of one writer upon another, on the resulting anxieties and pleasures of intellectual indebtedness. Some are concerned with parallelisms: two writers working on similar ideas, divided by a nation and an ocean. A key question that runs through the collection is what a focus on transatlantic relations can bring to our understanding of literary production and ideas of authorship and of national characteristics. Many of the contributors to the volume have opted to investigate these issues by examining specific relationships between two writers, one American, one British. The result of this is to produce a model of literary influence that operates at a close and personal level, involving specific and intimate knowledge of one writer by another.

Two contributors are particularly concerned with Scottish–American literary relations. Susan Manning's interest is in the power of a profoundly antagonistic relationship, that between Mark Twain and Walter Scott. She asks questions which extend what is usually conceived of as Twain's limited, parodic engagement between Scott's *Waverley* novels and his own work, in particular, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. In so doing she also, in her words, aims 'to complicate our current, perhaps too sanguine, view of Scottish–American literary relations'. Scott, like the American Harriet Beecher Stowe, was enormously influential in nineteenth-century literary culture and Manning tries to unravel what Twain claims to have been the misreading of Scott, just as Judie Newman demonstrates Stowe's mis-reading and mis-representation of the

Highland Clearances. In her essay on Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Sunny Memories of Foreign Lands*, Newman discusses Donald MacLeod's 'furious riposte' to that which he read as a poorly informed American intervention in Scottish politics, all the more shocking coming from the world-famous author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

R.J. Ellis's essay considers the inventive use that Harriet Wilson makes of the slave narrative in *Our Nig*. Wilson, an African-American woman, was unfamiliar with the conventions of the pastoral so that her revelation of 'pastoralism's underlying rural class structure' foregrounds issues that have been traditionally under-represented or ignored in that genre – most strikingly, questions of gender and race. Ellis invokes Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cousin Phillis* to show that, on the other side of the Atlantic, there was a concomitant frustration with the restraints of the pastoral mode. His essay provides a new and challenging context for *Our Nig*: an investigation into genre, moving beyond the slave narrative to what it means to see the text as – in his term – 'apastoral'. Class and nationhood are at the forefront of Alison Easton's interpretation of Sarah Orne Jewett's *The Tory Lover*. Jewett was a lifelong admirer of Walter Scott, particularly the Waverley novels, and Easton argues that she used Scott in order to situate the American Revolution in the national imagination. His work acted as a prompt, helping her to 'negotiate the complexities of this civil conflict in the creating of nations'. Lindsey Traub also invokes a monumental British precursor in her discussion of Henry James, examining his half-admiring, half-anxious relationship with George Eliot. As the youthful reviewer of her novels, James tried to contain her in a patronising critical commonplace as 'delightfully feminine' in her writing. No less free of personal bias when he met her a few years later, he described her as 'a great horse-faced blue-stocking', whose intellectual influence he still sought to underplay. Nevertheless, as Traub shows, his debt to her was substantial in terms of her professionalism as well as her aesthetic practice.

Anne-Marie Ford's essay is one of two in the collection that engages with manifestations of the Gothic imagination. Ford's reading of Elizabeth Stoddard's *The Morgesons* in relation to its borrowings from *Jane Eyre* is a salutary reminder of the genuinely transatlantic nature of the culture of letters in the mid-nineteenth century. Where, for Twain, Scott is an inappropriate though inescapable model, the example provided by Brontë for Stoddard, alongside figures such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning and George Sand, is one that she acknowledged and welcomed. Influences which are common to both Stoddard and Brontë are also scrutinised in Ford's essay: both writers adapted existing conventions of

Gothic to their own particular cultural circumstances; Cassandra Morgeson might be read as a Jane Eyre translocated into New England culture. Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik are also concerned with influence and translocation, in this case, that of the paradigmatic ex-patriate, T.S. Eliot. For Evelyn Waugh in *A Handful of Dust*, Eliot was a powerful Modernist precursor, and Eliot's support for Djuna Barnes's extraordinary novel *Nightwood* was made manifest by the Introduction he wrote for its second edition in 1937. Eliot as the quintessential Anglo-American cultural mediator is, for Horner and Zlosnik, a figure through whom we can consider the variety of transatlantic manifestations of Modernism, with attention paid to his apparent under-valuation of the Gothic mode. Their essay, however, concludes by arguing that 'Eliot's determinedly Eurocentric critical paradigm' which has been enormously influential in the conception of High Modernism, is exclusive rather than inclusive and has actually militated against full understanding of works by writers such as Barnes, despite his championing of her work.

In an essay on Walt Whitman and the Bolton Whitman Fellowship Carolyn Masel gives a fascinating account of the ultimately widespread effects of a relationship established between the poet and his most devoted British readers; she details the powerful influence which Whitman had upon a group of working men in a small Lancashire town, both aesthetically and ideologically. In correspondence and in personal visits to the poet by two of their number, a relationship was established that brought benefit of 'comfort and hope' to the dying Whitman as well as a sense of purpose to his Bolton readers who felt his influence in all areas of their lives and most notably in their thinking on democracy. A rather more intimate relationship is the starting point for Kate Fullbrook in her account of the strong personal dynamic of the friendship between Alfred North Whitehead and Gertrude Stein. For Stein, writing as Alice B. Toklas and with characteristic modesty, named Whitehead – along with herself and Pablo Picasso – as one of the three geniuses she knew. Despite the disparities in the writing styles and intellectual backgrounds of Stein and Whitehead, their mutual admiration and respect was augmented by their 'shared conception of process of movement, as the universal feature of all that exists'. Edith Wharton and Virginia Woolf as 'the two most articulate and influential literary women of the modern period' – as Katherine Joslin calls them – existed in a relationship of mutual enmity, positioned at opposite poles of the profession of authorship. They read each other's work but praise and censure came in equal measure: Woolf's admiration of Wharton's autobiography had a bitter aftertaste. Writing to Ethel

Smyth, she noted: 'I like the way she places colour in her sentences . . . There's the shell of a distinguished mind'. Joslin, like Horner and Zlosnik, interrogates the canon of High Modernism through the reception of the work of these two women writers whose professional lives were concurrent but not contiguous.

This collection has been produced at a time when theories of the Atlantic, circum-Atlantic and transatlantic are having a major impact on literary, cultural and historical studies. Bridget Bennett's polemical essay on nineteenth-century spiritualism engages with the implications of such approaches. She addresses the question of what an Atlanticist reading can bring to the understanding of the history of nineteenth-century spiritualism and through doing this raises questions of what such new scholarship can bring to more traditional conceptions of national literatures and traditions. Janet Beer and Ann Heilmann are concerned with two writers who blurred boundaries between polemic and aesthetic: Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Sarah Grand. These social reformers, working from within the feminist sexual purity movements on separate sides of the Atlantic, both believed 'that national and "racial" regeneration was women's special mission' and 'that women should spearhead the moral management of society'.

In bringing these essays together we are not attempting a cartography of Anglo-American relations from the mid-nineteenth to early twentieth centuries but exploring some of the more intriguing convergences and diversions in the paths taken by a number of celebrated writers and cultural commentators. With the exception of Masel's essay on Whitman, the essays in the collection are substantially concerned with prose; notwithstanding, many different styles and types of writing are examined. It should also not be seen as surprising that that the genre which is most susceptible of access on both sides of the Atlantic should have been the novel, and that the question of national identity, so vigorously pursued as an integral part of the enterprise of fiction by such as Mark Twain, could be both summative and formative of the idea of the other culture. Donald MacLeod could count on his audience's knowledge of Harriet Beecher Stowe's reputation as a novelist as well as humanitarian reformer to make his claims even more sensational, whilst Henry James could re-orient understanding of the realist novel by refracting it through the international light. The essays are offered as a contribution to the ongoing examination of the field of transatlantic cultural relations, applying paradigms opened up by new theorisations of the Atlantic to writers in the mainstream of American and British literature. To this extent, they represent

an intervention in the field that must be seen as partial but instructive; one which recognises the need, as well as the demand, for further investigations into and elucidations of the possibilities available to scholars in the growing field of transatlanticism.