Paul Marshall

# The Lord Chamberlain and the Containment of Americanization in the British Theatre of the 1920s

Reports in *The Stage* of an 'American invasion in the theatre' and the *New Statesman* writing of 'our Americanized theatre' expressed widely shared fears that transatlantic values were adversely affecting the British theatre in the wake of the First World War. In this article, Paul Marshall examines the strategies employed by the Lord Chamberlain's Office as it carried out its duties of censorship in dealing with plays from or about the United States. The Censor perceived it as his duty to defend public morals from elements that would threaten and challenge the values associated with 'Englishness', and, drawing on the Lord Chamberlain's Correspondence now available in the British Library, Paul Marshall explores how the Lord Chamberlain of the time, Lord Cromer, his readers, and his advisory board viewed the threat of the American 'invasion' – their shared values, sometimes disputed verdicts, and the formal and informal influences that could be brought to bear upon them. Five 'case studies' look at their attitudes to particular plays about and from the USA. Paul Marshall presently teaches history at Bromley High School, Kent, having studied for an MA in Text and Performance Studies at King's College and RADA.

THE FIRST WORLD WAR proved to be a turning point in the influence and authority of the USA as a world power and leader, so that by the 1920s American economic, international, and cultural influence had expanded in Britain and the rest of Western Europe.[1] This served to highlight the awareness of American values of commercialism, liberty, individualism, and the new sexual freedoms associated with the 'jazz age'. It also brought to the fore the defensive instincts of dominant middle-class culture in Britain, which sought refuge in 'Englishness' and its perceptions of 'good taste'.

In the period 1880–1920 'Englishness' was to be found in the past, within the cultural history and literature of England, and its use reflected an upper middle-class expression of national identity associated with institutions like the Anglican Church and the old universities of Oxford and Cambridge. In Matthew Arnold's elitist view of culture, *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), it was argued that, to belong to the national life, affiliation to these institutions was essential.[2] 'Good taste' as a metaphor-concept was used to distinguish acceptable and non-acceptable forms of behaviour and language according to the standard of 'Englishness'.

The advent of 'bad taste' as synonymous with American culture threatened the supposedly positive, cohesive influence of English upper middle-class values and beliefs. In the inter-war period not only had working-class identity been replaced by mass culture from America, as described by Richard Hoggart in *The Uses of Literacy*,[3] but the middle classes were under a similar state of siege from a perceived cultural 'invasion' or infusion from across the Atlantic. The friction between these two nations was clearly evident in the economic field, with Britain having to pay off debts to America from the First World War,[4] and in international affairs with American dominance at the Treaty of Versailles of 1919 and a policy of naval expansionism in the 1920s.[5]

The tensions between these two cultures are reflected in the reaction of the Lord Chamberlain's Office towards American



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texts imported between 1914 and 1930. The foreign presence within Britain brought out the insecurities of those who were placed in the role as moral guardians of the middle classes, and particularly of the recently enfranchised female population. The Lord Chamberlain's Office saw its duty as providing a service to defend public opinion at large from perceived dangerous elements that would threaten and challenge accepted values of 'Englishness'. This article will discuss the Lord Chamberlain's response to the process of Americanization in the 1920s.

## The Perceived Threat of Americanization

The term Americanization has been used by a number of writers who have explored the cultural influence of America in the past century and have noted different periods of invasion.[6] The Second World War and the 1950s brought many American 'ways of living' to Europe, and the process was greeted with a mixed response ranging from apathy[7] to enthusiasm and to antagonism from the political left.[8] In the 1920s, theatrical trade papers like *The Stage* spoke of 'what is pleasantly called the American invasion . . . contained in full strength pieces and plays of all sorts coming over from the other side' (*The Stage Year Book, 1927*, p. 6). The *New Statesman* on 3 November 1928, in an article called 'Our Americanized Theatre', concluded that American influence had damaged the theatre, its growth dependent on the decline of home-grown talent.

While no mention is made of the term 'Americanization' in the documents from the Lord Chamberlain's Office, it can be argued that the censor was aware implicitly of this process in the theatre and sought to ensure that if possible it was contained by using a number of strategies employing formal and informal criteria in order to preserve English identity. The picture presented is of an institution under siege from cultural influence from abroad and seeking refuge in an English image based on the Edwardian imperial dream.

Though the Office was very aware of the change in mood following the 1918 Armistice, its real desire was to try to stem the flow of foreign influence permeating British society.[9] When examining a play called *Dishonoured Lady*, Lord Buckmaster from the Advisory Board wrote in March 1930: 'I may add that this play is yet another illustration of different views taken of plays on both sides of the Atlantic and I much desire that those on this side should prevail.' The Office attempted to ensure its hegemony over cultural values in the theatre, which was firmly kept in place through a strategy of enforcement and at times negotiation.[10]

However, while common assumptions were held as to what should be preserved, there were some differences within the Office which impeded an effective defence against any cultural intrusion. Also, it is argued that though the censor did try to keep to a code, the institution was able to show, unwillingly or willingly, a degree of flexibility in its decision-making process, and therefore at times did change its mind in the face of pressure from the press, public, and theatrical producers. But despite such concessions, at the heart of the Office was the desire that, as the 'target culture', English identity should be maintained; and hence the institution acted as a 'filter' to any cultural interaction.[11]

## The Culture and the Censorship

The Lord Chamberlain's acceptance or rejection of a play was defined by a number of criteria based upon (a) formal recommendations; and (b) informal comments. These – unseen by the public, but to be found in the Lord Chamberlain's Documents – were based on conservative cultural assumptions. While decisions were mainly governed by the personal views of members from the Office, other contextual aspects of the 1920s had a degree of influence, including the pressure exerted upon the censor by a variety of individuals and organizations. However, despite these rules, there were limits to the strength of the institution. Hence, a measure of adaptability allowed plays to be passed that would have been banned in earlier decades, thus further permitting American cultural influence to permeate English society.



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Theatre in the 1920s has been seen as a suburban, middle-class preserve in terms of audience reception, with the Lord Chamberlain functioning as moral watchdog of English cultural values. Much criticism has been levelled at the poor artistic quality of British drama of the decade, and the lack of experimental work as seen in Europe and America. Many lay the blame for the artistic dearth in British theatre at the censor's feet, and Hubert Griffith, author of the banned 1929 play *Red Sunday*,[12] believed that there was some kind of right-wing conspiracy to prevent the spread of communist and socialist ideas.

Richard Findlater's, *Banned! A Review of Theatrical Censorship in Britain*,[13] has to be seen in the context of the 1960s and the demise of the Office. This view is reflected in the articles written by Steve Nicholson,[14] who examined the Chamberlain's reaction to Russian influence. He believes the 'establishment' to have been actively trying to defend capitalism. However, both these positions exaggerate the unity of the Office and overpoliticize the explicit intentions of its personnel, who were chiefly concerned with safeguarding the morals of society.

With regard to the United States, while it is recognized that the Censor could prove a hindrance to an influx of unwanted American plays by using a variety of techniques, ultimately he could not halt a cultural interchange between these two nations. While there is no mention of any cultural 'invasion' within the Lord Chamberlain's documents, the actions and language as preserved in the reports and letters from the Office give the impression of an institution under pressure from the age's changing social mores.

In literature, writers such as Lawrence and Forster were challenging many of the assumptions of Victorian and Edwardian life.[15] American drama, along with the increasingly popular Broadway musical, was yet another test of the cosy, imperial picture of middle-class England because it presented alternative worlds of open commercialism, efficiency, individualism, escapism, and 'moral' freedom that proved to be attractive to many British audiences. Fed on a diet of Edwardian drawing-room plays, audiences were keen to explore different cultures: while American drama may have brought sleaze, bad language, sentimentality, and violence to the West End, at least it was perceived as exciting, and would challenge the theatre at a time when many felt the 'New Drama' that existed before the First World War was a spent force.

In the commercialized theatre, American drama and musicals thus grew in popularity and often offered an optimistic world view. This caught the mood of those in the 1920s who were longing to forget the experiences of the trenches; while in the non-commercial sector expressionists such as Eugene O'Neill introduced forms of theatre which disturbed the usually positive perceptions of human nature underlying the philosophy of most plays in the West End.[16]

### The Formal Criteria of Censorship

Formal rules that defined the action of the censor in his battle against any 'moral decay' were defined by the 1909 Joint Select Committee.[17] The reason for banning a play was to be codified, so that the Lord Chamberlain would license any play unless he considered it could be reasonably held:

(a) to be indecent;
(b) to contain offensive personalities;
(c) to represent on the stage in an invidious manner a living person or any person recently dead;
(d) to do violence to the sentiment of religious reverence;
(e) to be calculated to conduce to crime or vice;
(f) to be calculated to impair friendly relations with any foreign power;
(g) to be calculated to cause a breach of the peace.

Also, it was made clear that it was to be the Lord Chamberlain and not the Examiner of Plays who would be responsible for granting or withholding a licence. While these recommendations never became law due to the government facing other pressing matters,



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and these suggested reforms not appearing urgent,[18] their effect was tremendous, and they were to serve as a guide for subsequent censors right through to the 1960s. This can be seen as late as autumn 1966, with the Royal Shakespeare Company's presentation of *US* at the Aldwych Theatre. Under the direction of Peter Brook, *US* was in part a political satire on the American involvement in Vietnam. When giving evidence before the 1967 Joint Select Committee the then Lord Chamberlain, Lord Cobbold, used the 1909 code to try to ban the play because it might have impaired relations with an allied power.

LORD GOODMAN In that sense you were exercising a purely political censorship?

LORD COBBOLD If I may quote recommendation (f) which we have from the 1909 Committee . . . 'plays should be licensed unless they were judged . . . to be calculated to impair friendly relations with any Foreign Power'.

The rule quoted was an important guide, sometimes used in connection with texts that might affect the sensitivities of the United States. The Lord Chamberlain was careful not to be offensive to any foreign power, but this rule was to be interpreted in the national interest and of course changed with the coming of the First World War.

Other parts of the recommendations were of particular relevance for American plays imported into Britain. Indecency, religious topics, scenes set around the criminal underworld, and the use of violence sometimes formed part of the subject matter and language of imported plays, reflecting changes within American society, and often disapproved of by the Office. Thus, the advent of Prohibition brought a rise in criminal activity – an underworld which, while of great interest to the British public, the censor did not want to see represented on stage.

## The Informal Criteria of Censorship

The informal criteria of censorship focused on cultural concepts of 'taste' and 'Englishness', and would often appear in press reviews of plays that were considered inappropriate for the English stage. These were common currency during the 1920s and reflected the dominant middle-class values of English society in the inter-war period: good manners, sexual propriety, appropriate language, and a sense of decency acceptable to a polite audience. Often the Censor would describe plays in terms of 'tone' or 'atmosphere' in order to exclude those which did not conform to the notions of 'English taste'. Conversely, plays that passed were often complimented on their 'perfect good taste'.

In effect this process of discrimination served to discourage the writing of plays that did not fit in with the established view of traditional English culture, while preserving the distinctiveness of middle-class values. The view held by many was that English 'taste' was very different to American 'taste', and what would be acceptable in America would not be acceptable in Britain. 'Englishness' was also not defined by the Office, but was seen as essential to the national identity. Protection of the British Empire, the monarchy, and the existing social and moral order were assumed values to which it was hoped most plays would assent.

The value placed on Britain's supposed cultural superiority over other nations was cloaked in paternal language so that the censor's position was justified as protector or guardian of public morality. Despite the Office's protestation that it was not a judge of drama, the boundaries of what was acceptable or unacceptable were clearly in the minds of those behind the process, and must have been an influence on those writing new plays.

However, despite the prejudices held which did at times provide a barrier, there were limits to the power of the censor. This depended on a number of external and internal factors, partly determined by how the play would be received by the public at large in Britain and sometimes America. George S. Street (Reader of Plays), in an article in *Fortnightly Review*, Vol. 118 (July–December 1925), commented on the Office wanting to extend freedom up to the point of public protest:



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> In these circumstances of division in the public mind the right course for the censorship, as I understand it, is to hold a really enlightened balance, extending freedom where, to the best of its intelligence, it judges freedom to be right, but guarding this freedom, by its now careful discrimination, from being drowned in a deluge of protest.

This 'careful discrimination' would be interpreted by the censor, who would be a vital player in the decision-making process.

The censor made efforts to keep the two cultures separate in order to preserve a distinctive English identity. America was associated with a great deal of 'vulgarity', defined in terms of the language, content, and style of their plays. 'Vulgar' plays could be passed, but then the censor would employ the strategy of ensuring that the setting would not be 'Anglicized'.

However, aware of the entertainment value and popularity of some of these plays, the Office did not want to deny to the British public what amused American audiences. This served to reinforce the middle-class cultural ascendancy while demeaning the values of another culture. When the American character was portrayed unfavourably in a play, often such stereotyping was accepted by the Office.

### Power Structure of the Chamberlain's Office

Appointed by the Crown, the officeholder of Lord Chamberlain was the key figure in interpreting the key criteria. The 1909 Joint Committee's Report, one of the great landmarks in the history of censorship, served to ensure that the Office of Lord Chamberlain would be the deciding authority on whether a play could be granted a licence for public performance. The recruitment of the censor had been political, and hence a change of personnel occurred with each new government. However, this was to change in 1924, when George V persuaded a number of Conservative, Liberal, and Labour leaders that posts in the Great Offices of the Royal Household and certain other court appointments should be considered as non-political. According to Ruby Cromer,

> This . . . obviated the necessity for frequent changes in the personnel of the King's immediate entourage, as had hitherto been the constitutional practice.[19]

The office was thus 'at the King's pleasure', subject to the Prime Minister's approval. Richard Findlater views the change as a sinister move by the Crown, just before Britain's first Labour Government had come to power, to ensure that there would be no change of personnel unsympathetic to the values of upper-class society. Certain checks were established within this autocratic system, and hence an Advisory Board was set up to advise the Censor. However, ultimately the deciding authority remained the Lord Chamberlain and, reflecting his considerable power over the censorship process, he was not obliged to give any reason as to why a play had been banned.

The Office also went through a number of personality changes between the start of the First World War and the early 'twenties. The man who dominated the censorship process was Lord Cromer, Lord Chamberlain from 1922 to 1938. He came from a very distinguished, aristocratic background:[20] his father was the famous First Earl of Cromer, while he himself was educated at Eton and had served in the diplomatic service. However, by his contemporaries he is portrayed as trying to steer a middle course and as ware of the pressures upon him from different interest groups.[21] Contemporaries viewed him as a polite and courteous man who had the support of the majority of managers, and this certainly does come through in the reading of the documents.

Cromer's informal comments, undisclosed to the public, give an indication of his often biased opinions on American texts. Remarks in red ink at the end of the Reader's Report often signify his implicit prejudices towards the American nation and his faith in English culture. Protection of English 'taste' and identity were among his prime objectives, in the face of the onslaught of cultural invasion from across the seas, whether from Europe or the United States. He saw himself also in the role of guardian of the public morals. In



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reality, he was a man not in tune with the new challenges of the 'twenties. Aware of the pressures he faced, he even threatened to resign in 1924, offering to hand over his position of power. As Ruby Cromer explains, 'It was difficult for one individual to control the tide of modern thought, even were it advisable to do so.' He tried to dam the floodgates of change and progress by using the powers at his disposal. However, at times he was willing to forego his personal opinions for the sake of perceived national interest and on the advice of those conservative forces he trusted.

George S. Street, who had been a novelist, playwright, critic, and civil servant, was seen as an important participant in the power brokering of the censorship process. As Reader of Plays from 1914 to 1936, he held an important position as interpreter and examiner, whose judgements were often vital in determining whether a play would be accepted or rejected; and he acted as another cultural watchdog against infringements of taste. While his job was to review the plot, the documents reveal his observations and dislikes of a certain type of American play. He was often more liberal than the censor in his willingness to recommend a licence, and gave the impression for public consumption that he wanted to liberalize the process and extend freedoms.

Also part of the power structure was the Advisory Board, which had been established in 1909 to ensure that the Lord Chamberlain would not be criticized for being too undemocratic. The original members chosen were Sir John Hare and Sir Squire Bancroft, both actor-managers; Mr Rufus Isaacs, KC, MP; Mr J. Comyns Carr, author; and Sir Douglas Dawson, the Lord Chamberlain's Comptroller. When the Board was revised, Rufus Isaacs and Comyns Carr were replaced by Sir Edward Carson and S. O. (later Viscount) Buckmaster, both lawyers.

Members were often at odds with the fast-changing world of the 1920s, and yet they were given the responsibility of advising the Chamberlain on matters of public decency and taste. There was a tendency for conservative views to dominate and certainly the Board was hostile to Americanisms creeping onto the English stage.

The power structure behind the censorship process gave the outward impression of a paternal democratic institution. In reality it was a tight-knit oligarchy that represented the thoughts and opinions of middle-class England in the 1920s. However, it gave the Office the appearance of legitimation necessary in an increasingly democratized society, which ultimately lacked representation in this censorship process. It must be remembered that despite the Lord Chamberlain's position being ostensibly non-political after 1924, he owed his appointment to the Conservative leader, Stanley Baldwin, and reflected conservative values in his decision-making.

### The Political and Social Context

The cultural and political context of the 1920s inside and outside Britain played an important role in determining the actions of the Lord Chamberlain's Office. There were moments of tension that affected opinions towards plays. The ties with the United States were very strong, even at times of crisis. America was a land that had brought security and hope against a common foe, but also posed a potential danger to British interests. At times of international crisis such as the First World War, diplomatic considerations imposed their own constraints on the censorship process, with the Lord Chamberlain aware of the sensitivities of Britain's position overseas. According to the diplomatic situation, American feeling had to be taken into account to ensure there was no damage to Anglo-American relations.

Also, the censor was well aware of the different factions inside Britain that either held him to be too lenient or too strict. His plea was that he was in his position to defend the interests of the public, though this was defined in terms of groups that counted in society. For example, the Public Morality Council, a Christian-based pressure organization, campaigned along with a number of newspapers to ensure that the Office continued to protect the morals of society and



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ensure decent values were upheld. Every year reports were drawn up on plays and shows in the West End. According to Richard Findlater, blacklisted plays 'were, no doubt, the subject of remonstratory letters not only to the Lord Chamberlain but to other pillars of society such as the Archbishop of Canterbury'.

I want now to explore a selection of American plays (or plays performed for the first time in America) in the light of the comments made by the Readers' reports, information from the Advisory Board, and comments, usually made in red ink, by the Lord Chamberlain. These show not only the opinions and prejudices of the Office towards American plays, but also how, despite the different rules, formal and informal, the censor was at times limited in his course of action. Despite the objections to some of these plays and the power that the censor had to cut and amend offending passages, eventually they were passed, suggesting that there was a limit to the power of the censor in acting as a filter to American cultural influence within Britain.

## Case Study 1

### UNCLE SAM

*First entitled* Friendly Enemies. *Licensed 1919, first performed at the Haymarket Theatre, January 1919*

Using a story based around two stereotyped German characters, the author attempted to put forward a 'moral' message of reconciliation between nations after the First World War. The plot concerned the contrasting attitudes towards the war of two 'typical' German-Americans, Pfieffer and Block. The former remained a 'thorough Hun', a typical Prussian militarist intent on European domination, while the latter was cosmopolitan in sentiments and creed. Pfieffer's son, Wilhelm, at heart anti-German, marries Block's daughter and sails to Europe. His ship is sunk by the treacherous bomb of a German stoker. Wilhelm is rescued and Pfieffer, for the first time, realizes Hun brutality.

The case of *Uncle Sam* reveals how external factors such as Britain's international relations with the US played a part in the decision-making process of the Office and how in the end it was reluctant to oppose the interests of President Wilson, despite initial fears. A play's acceptance may be judged by the formal criteria laid down by the 1909 Joint Select Committee, though this could be interpreted according to the censor's view of the nation's interest. At the end of the War, the Office did not want to upset American sensitivities, because of fears of diplomatic consequences.

The Lord Chamberlain's opinions indicate an ambivalence towards the United States and reveal his perceptions of American identity. During the War this was often associated with a sense of danger and rivalry because of the allegiance some Americans felt towards Germany and their initial neutrality in the conflict. However, America also shared a common western heritage and in 1917 became an ally. Also, the documents show that differences did occur, and therefore it would be misleading to present the Lord Chamberlain, the Reader of Plays, and the Advisory Board as a united wing of the 'establishment'.

Censorship nearly always depended on sources that supported conservative national interests. In this case the censor (1912–1921), Lord Sandhurst, was under pressure from 'establishment' forces from the start with the involvement of the War Office exposing the close connection between government departments. In a letter to Douglas Dawson dated 14 December 1918, Lieutenant Collins (an American Intelligence Officer) drew the attention of Colonel Fischer to the play as 'an ingenious piece of German propaganda'. Two days later Dawson wrote to Colonel Fischer without even having read the play, stating that it would be 'drastically but diplomatically dealt with'. In a memo to the Readers of Plays, dated 16 December 1918, Dawson informed them confidentially that a play entitled *Friendly Enemies*, which had been running in New York, would be shortly presented here for licence. He commented: 'This play is an ingenious piece of German



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propaganda; the author is a German Jew: it has been produced in America by a Hungarian and the leading actors are German.'

Ernest Bendall (Joint Reader of Plays with G. S. Street) attempted as much objectivity as possible, pointing out in his résumé that the play had as its moral the suggestion that 'our German enemy, especially when he realizes that he is beaten, is at the bottom, a very good fellow indeed', and that Pfieffer was merely a political victim of his own lying propaganda. But Bendall's comments reflect the political context in Britain, where great anti-German feeling was expressed at the 'Coupon Election' of 1919, and at first he did not recommend it for licence, regarding it as a piece of subtle propaganda with the object of post-war reconciliation.

G. S. Street offers a contrasting perspective on the play, objecting that it would seem intolerant to lay down that a play must not suggest that any German could possibly be a good person at heart. The idea of tolerance was very appealing to the censors, being seen as a hallmark of 'Englishness'.[22] Street points out that in the arguments between the pro-German and pro-allied German, the latter always has the best of it. The grounds for refusal must be based on a prior knowledge that it was intended as propaganda. Street did not doubt this, and saw the object as being to conciliate opinion in favour of a reformed and converted Germany. He refers to part of the formal code as established by the 1909 Joint Select Committee, and points out that a refusal might also be based on the possibility of a disturbance at the theatre, as when the pro-German asserts his original views; but such ideas had been expressed before in many plays already written about the War.

Dawson (30 December 1918) agreed with the criticism of both Readers and with the final verdict of Mr Bendall that the play should not be licensed. His comment, 'Knowing how credulous is the British public, how impossible it was before the war to wake them to a sense of their danger', is revealing of his view of the public as sheep that need the guardian role of a shepherd. He continued: 'The stage is a powerful medium of propaganda and the German knows it', and concluded that the play should be refused not on the intolerant grounds that it shows that some Germans are partially human, but simply for the reason that to allow the production of the play would be inadvisable, on the ground that Germany might still be in a position to start another war and that public morale must be sustained.

In a letter to Mr Trendall in December 1919, Malcolm Watson on behalf of the theatre manager Mr Harrison expressed the opinion that Harrison was aware of certain rumours about the nature of the play, but wanted him to know that it was a pro-allies play. President Wilson himself had witnessed it at the National Theatre, Washington, and spoke at the performance from his box in the most flattering terms to the large audience assembled. This piece of information was to prove highly influential.

From the Board, Lord Buckmaster noted (2 January 1919) the pressure from the press and the temptation to ban the production in the national interests. But he could not accept that it was a piece of German propaganda, and commented: 'If the British public cannot be trusted with the chance of seeing such a performance – a chance of which I do not believe they will avail themselves – they can hardly be trusted to walk alone.' The grounds that a play constituted propaganda were far more contentious than refusing an obscene or immoral play. He saw the censor's first duty as being to protect society against such infection. His conclusion was that the title should be changed, since it was the portion of the whole play that suggested propaganda; and this idea was eventually adopted.

Higgins, on 6 January 1919, took into account the opinion of President Wilson: 'In view of President Wilson's strongly and publicly expressed views, it would be impossible to refuse to licence the performance without the very strongest justification.' He could not see how the play could be viewed as a piece of pro-German propaganda. 'If the licence were refused those who adopt President Wilson's views might plausibly plead that the hidden hand had been at work to



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suppress a useful piece of pro-ally propaganda.' This presidential influence was to be of paramount importance in reaching a final decision. Meanwhile, Squire Bancroft, on 8 January 1919, thought the play undesirable and wished he could offer a strong reason for refusing it.

Despite such feelings against the play, the Office changed its original title from *Friendly Enemies* and passed it under the title *Uncle Sam*. On 21 January 1919 Dawson, writing to Colonel Fischer, regretted the decision, but it was in accordance with the majority of the Board. The Office was clearly divided on this play, but the advice of the Advisory Board and the influence of American presidential approval won the day.

### Case Study 2

EAST IS WEST

*by Samuel Shipman and John Hyme.*
*First performed at the Queen's Theatre,*
*4 May 1920*

The story centres on the love of a young American for a supposedly Chinese girl, Mingtoy. The girl is on a love boat and is sold to the highest bidder. A young American called Billy enters the scene with Lo Sang, a Chinese Merchant of San Francisco. Mingtoy is bought by Lo Sang, lives in San Francisco, and is loved as a father loves his daughter. After a scandal she moves to Charlie Yang, who is described as a 'rogue'. Billy again intervenes and she goes to his house as a maid. They are in love, but his family is resolutely opposed to the relationship. In the end it is revealed that Mingtoy was stolen as a child from the American mission in revenge for the conversion of Chinese children. She is the daughter of an eminent American and 'all is well'.

This play reveals not only the imperialist and racial prejudices held by members of the Lord Chamberlain's Office, but also the common cultural bonds between the two western powers. Sustaining the Victorian view of imperial grandeur, the superiority of the westerner was taken for granted, and here the United States could be viewed as sharing the same cultural heritage, opposed to the Other as represented by the East.[23]

Street's comments on this play are revealing, and show the cultural context in which he was operating. Western superiority is assumed in the American text, but it is also supported by comments from the Reader. Street notes that the revelation at the end of the play was not too much of a surprise in view of the fact that Mingtoy took easily to American ways and prayed secretly to a crucifix: this 'of course takes away any unpleasantness of racial intermix'. Apart from the dubious business of the buying of girls, with Chinese purchasers looking them over, the play was recommended for licence and posed no problems for the censor.

### Case Study 3

ANNA CHRISTIE

*by Eugene O'Neill. Licensed 2 February 1923,*
*first performed at the Garrick Theatre,*
*March–April 1923*

Many of the American plays were criticized for their use of violence through language and content. This was often defined in terms of tone. However, despite the personal prejudices of the 'establishment', respect for the creative skill of an author might hold sway. In this case acceptance of the artistic merit of Eugene O'Neill's work proved to be an overwhelming factor in allowing a play to be passed. Street in his report recognized the exceptional talent of the dramatist, but found that his chief fault was a confusion between violence and strength. However, he was also aware that, while twenty years ago the play would definitely have been banned, times were now changing; and he even admitted that his summary of the play gave no idea of the beauty of the play or of the recurring motif of the sea and the old sailor's hatred of it. It was not the theme of the play that caused him concern, but the violence and 'extreme frankness of the language'.

Several 'bloody's were noticed, but it was simple to keep them out of the rough dialogue. Used in abuse, 'bloody cow' (Act III, p. 28) was regarded as very unpleasant.



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Anna's outburst at Act III, p. 23–9, and another in Act IV, p. 29, were cited as the most extreme instances of violent language. While Cromer realized that a forcible play might demand forcible language, an overdose of the word 'bloody' was uncalled for. He did not take exception to the word 'cow' so long as it was not used in conjunction with the word 'bloody'.

Despite his initial objections to the play, a visit to the performance, as given in its original form, convinced him that any alteration would mar the text and detract from its dramatic effect. He did reserve the right of intervention if there were further protests. The Lord Chamberlain was acutely aware of the pressure he was under not to suppress genuine talent, and in this case, seeing the play in performance – a different experience from reading the text – persuaded him that a licence should be granted, based on discretionary principles and more importantly on the fear of public outcry if the play had been banned.

## Case Study 4

OUR BETTERS

*by W. S. Maugham. Licensed 11 May 1923*

This play touched on criticisms of Americans which might inflame tensions between the two nations. The case shows the effect that some pressure groups (notably royalty) had on the decision-making process of the Office, but also how in the end the censor was guided by the opinions of the Advisory Board and the fact that the play had already been produced in America.

In Street's report, he recognized that there had been some outcry over the play in New York, but felt that it was not an attack upon Americans in general but only some who live in England and 'of course Mr Maugham cannot mean that all Americans who marry titled foreigners are bad'. However, the play was passed to the Advisory Board for comment and here some of the anxieties of the Office were exposed.

Douglas Dawson commented on 27 September 1923: 'To my mind the important point at issue was the international one of possible US susceptibilities and as I have not seen the script I cannot judge this.' Lord Buckmaster, on 21 April 1923, thought there were no adequate reasons for refusing a licence, since he could not see the objections to the introduction of vicious people into dramas. If they were used for the purpose of slandering a nation or an individual a play would not be given a licence, but he could not see that in this case. 'Nor can I see any general attack upon Americans. No nation can afford to be too thin skinned in these matters.' Higgins, on 26 April 1923, agreed and could see no reason for withholding a licence. One problem noted by Street in accepting the play for licence was an incident where a couple were supposedly intimate in a summerhouse; but this would occur offstage and he felt it did not have the significance attributed by Street.

The conservative pressures that the Office came under were exemplified in *The Daily Graphic* of 17 September 1923, where under the headline 'Is the Censor Necessary?' the reviewer came to the conclusion that the censor was supposed to guard the public morals, but would better be called the 'non-censor' in view of the sort of plays which were drawing full houses.

Royal pressure was also made clear, but diplomatically dealt with. A letter from Balmoral Castle on 18 September 1923 from Lord Stamfordham addressed to Rowland conveyed the views of George V, who thought the play objectionable and was inclined to question whether it had been carefully considered by the censor. He added: 'Apart from its immoral tendency it apparently is not very favourable to the Americans.'

Cromer in a long letter of 21 September 1923 explained his position via Lord Stamfordham. He hoped that the King would not be influenced by *The Daily Graphic*, which was well known for its attacks on the Office. He recognized that the Lord Chamberlain was at that time the butt of press criticisms, and that while some said he was lax others said he was too strict. He recognized that there was no pleasing everyone. What he considered to be the 'right and common



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sense view of things' was the guiding light by which he judged plays, rather than by a fixed set of principles. 'There is no pleasing everyone successfully, and . . . so long as I take what I consider to be the right and common sense view of things, I remain uninfluenced by newspaper blame or praise.' While his actions depended on his own interpretation of the criteria for censorship, he was also open to the advice of the Board, and on balance judged that this play would not harm Anglo-American relations.[24]

Cromer recognized that *Our Betters* was a forceful satire on Americans who had made their way into European society through the influence of money. But the play had already been acted in America, where sensibilities were more likely to be offended than in London. He found the play's theme objectionable and it presented considerable difficulties to his mind; he could understand that many Americans would not like the play, and that someone should have spoken to the King on the subject. But he confessed that he was in a difficult position, in view of its having been acted in America and recommended for performance by the Reader of Plays, with three members of his own Advisory Board – Lord Buckmaster, Sir Squire Bancroft, and Mr H. H. Higgins – stating that they saw no sufficient reason for withholding a licence. He assured the King that careful consideration had been given to the play in view of his own expressed concern.

In a letter dated 23 September 1923 the King stated that he did not wish to find fault with the Department, nor was His Majesty aware that it had been produced in America, which would of course affect the King's adverse criticism. As three of the Advisory Committee (the views of Lord Buckmaster being considered especially important) had recommended the sanctioning of the play, he could not insist upon its censorship.

In a letter to Dawson of 26 September 1923, Cromer admitted that he personally would have liked to ban the play, since he knew it would give rise to feelings of disquiet amongst some Americans. But as it had been produced in America and the majority of the Board plus Street were for licensing it, he decided to act on advice rather than his own judgement. The play had the potential for causing offence and therefore for breaking the formal code of 1909, but a 'common sense' view was taken according to the circumstances and national interest. Economic factors had also to be taken into account, since any American plays banned might mean English exports facing retaliatory action in the US.

### Case Study 5

BACHELOR HUSBANDS

*by Avery Hopwood. Licensed 26 February 1924*

This case shows the Board's dislike of certain American plays and the feeling that they did not conform to English 'taste'. Street in his report described the plot revolving around the wrong done to rich American husbands by their wives who go on foreign trips to Europe. Nothing wrong is meant to happen in the play, but according to Street (19 February 1924), 'there is a good deal of what seems too indelicate to English taste'. However, in spite of this the play was passed since the censor was able to use the strategy of cutting and amending offending passages.

In the minds of the Office, America was often associated with sexual impropriety. In this case specific objections were made to the second act, which needed serious consideration. Its setting is described as a 'boudoir', but throughout is treated as a bedroom, with a certain amount of undressing going on, finally ending in bed. Of particular concern was the husband's proposing to go to sleep and his wife's subsequent disappointment and humiliation. The censor described this as 'really too frank for English taste'. Other areas of 'bad taste' were marked in blue pencil in the scripts – Act 1, p. 37–8, and Act II, p. 14. Street commented that: 'The difficulty with American taste is that it mixes up sincerity and farce in such a way that frank speeches which are all right in the former element sound wrong on account of the latter.'

Despite these prejudices, the censor passed the play but with certain stipulations. The



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characters would have to make it clear that they were not going to bed, and the language in Act II, p. 52, must be modified. On 12 February 1924 Cromer gave his personal opinion that this was 'a horrible type of play', but a week later Street concluded that satisfactory changes had been made to the text. The scene in Act II was now set in a boudoir with a separate bedroom offstage, and the wife's disappointment in the matter of her husband was to be more delicately put: 'It still remains, but is not now excessively repugnant to English taste.' A large number of minor modifications were made to other passages expressly objected to by the Lord Chamberlain.

Cecil Barth, the theatre's manager, wrote to Cromer on 18 February 1924 in response to the suggestion that Americans often mixed sincerity with farce, explaining that the play was not being performed as a farcical comedy, but as a protest against a certain type of married woman who spends her days dancing, playing, and travelling. Street refutes this because of the number of incidents he claimed to be merely farcical, notably the introduction of a speaking doll merely to raise a laugh (Act II, p. 52).

## Conclusion

The Office's unwritten assumptions about American drama meant that many plays were disliked and frowned upon. Claims of the censor's impartiality were clearly erroneous, though the censor had to be careful of public opinion, and to justify his existence had to be seen as a kind of Roman tribune defending the interests of the public. This meant many American plays were reluctantly given a licence, since the censor knew they would be popular with the West End audience or the highbrow press. In some cases the censor was persuaded by the quality of the drama, and therefore gave a licence, though always remaining mindful of conservative public opinion.

America represented all that Britain was not – modern and efficient, and ready to take advantage of the new technology, not least as represented by the movies – but it was also associated with danger. While British superiority could still be assumed in relation to the East, the relationship with America showed ambivalence towards a culture that held so much in common and yet posed a perceived threat to the values of 'Englishness'. Americans were stereotyped as being 'vulgar' or overly 'sentimental', but in reality this concealed a suspicion that America had more to offer western Europe than its own notions of imperial grandeur. It was easier to judge Americans by assuming a common cultural identity based on 'taste'. In other areas, notably film, by the early 1930s Britain was so aware of creeping Americanization that a counter-assault was encouraged.[25]

In some cases, approval of plays suggested a degree of liberalization and flexibility in the censorship process, where the determining factor may well have been the economic consequences of refusal, and the pressure of British audiences and the press, attracted by the fast and furious American commercial stage (for example the popular *'Is Zat So?'* produced in 1926) and the non-commercial and experimental work of Eugene O'Neill.

However, Cromer, despite his own protestations of 'objectivity', operated in a framework which ensured that plays were passed on his terms, and in reality exposed the prejudices of the Lord Chamberlain's Office. According to the recommendations of 1909, he had to be aware of impairing any relations with a foreign power, and did not want to cause any rift or embarrassment with other government departments. But his decisions tended to be based on his interpretation of events rather than adherence to a formal code.

Certain forms of drama would excuse some of the supposed offences. Farce and romantic comedy, which were perceived as not stretching the social conscience due to their content and function, presented no challenge to the censor and therefore were favoured by the office. American plays of little intrinsic merit were often praised if they provided a 'moral' upholding received values. Certain forms of melodrama might be improbable, but were acceptable so long as they had such a moral. Plays were seen in



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terms of being 'jolly good fun and in perfect taste' – that is, not challenging the accepted values, and in keeping with the function of theatre to entertain.

By some, America was seen as the land where dreams could be met and hopes fulfilled. Its plays and more especially its films stressed individual experiences and challenges rather than jovial spats in the drawing rooms of the West End. American drama brought an element of excitement and pace that was missing in British theatre. While the censor did not always appreciate this, plays were passed if they were liked by British audiences without disturbing their social conscience. Many American plays looked down on as being 'too sentimental' for British reserve and 'good manners' were none the less accepted since they were also unchallenging.

The Censor held strong opinions on the matter of language – not so much its comprehensibility, but from a feeling that Americanisms were somehow corrupting the English language. Some plays were seen as 'vulgar' because of their setting and substance, and the use of chorus girls was matter for suspicion. Cromer might resort to the strategy of ensuring that a play retained its American setting, and was not anglicized. While the Board did express the feeling that the British public should not be denied what amused the American public, America was far too often associated with vulgarity, sensuality, and blasphemy. Behind the façade that the Office was acting fairly towards foreign drama there was the desire that the British view of 'taste' should prevail.

In being influenced by the prevailing cultural assumptions of his times, Cromer was only following in the footsteps of his aristocratic predecessors. Despite a belief that he steered an 'enlightened' course,[26] his actions are a reflection of the conservative forces of his age rather than suggesting any desire to liberalize the censor's role. The nature of West End theatre meant that most of the British drama submitted to him did not offend the English 'taste' shared by its audiences; but the influx of American drama too often offended against its tenets.

He had many strategies at his disposal to support the survival of English culture by applying its values to test American plays. He could ban a play, but there was always the risk of uproar in the press and accusations of dictatorial power. An alternative was negotiation to excise certain words and passages, and in the documents there is often extended discussion over the precise nature and meaning of such words. Another step would be an appeal to a number of bodies to give the impression of a democratic, listening institution. But listening to the War Office or the Church was not likely to shift his inherently conservative position.

At times there is the sense that the British theatre was under threat from the influx of American plays and their imposition of American 'taste'. The Censor tried to give the impression of having an open mind, but he was aware of the insecurities of the British imperial position in the 1920s. His aim was to defend and assert English identity and ensure its distinctiveness in the face of Americanisms. His position was now officially non-political – and indeed his conservatism was not of the party political but the moral kind. The idea that the 'establishment' provided a united front is simplistic: the Advisory Board would thus often disagree amongst themselves, and sometimes with Cromer and Street. However, they did share the same social positions and moral assumptions, and supported the use of different strategies to ensure that the English national identity would be preserved against the American 'invasion'.

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