



2003

Ain't That America

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Recommended Citation

Marks, Lindsay (2003) "Ain't That America," *Cedarville Review*: Vol. 6 , Article 13.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/cedarvillereview/vol6/iss1/13>

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Keywords

Nonfiction

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Ain't That America

I'm no expatriate.

But maybe I would be if I could do it with class, like T.S. Eliot or someone. I certainly would be if someone would pay me for it—but then we'd all be, wouldn't we, and it would lose its romance.

In the *The New York Times Magazine* recently a man wrote an article about being an American student at Oxford in the 80s. He said he found it difficult to live down his Americanness there—he felt as though he had to make excuses for his country, for his propensity for all things deep fried, for his vicious torture of every vowel sound; for bad music and bad style and obesity and cancer and suicide and all sins of a violent nature; for America's foreign policy, gun policy, education policy, and all policies that lead to more cancer-causing agents in the McFood we oversell to unsuspecting countries. The article went on to say that England's "Anti-American" sentiments were surprisingly easy to swallow, especially at the world's premier institution of higher learning. He easily participated in the dance called the America wallop; it's a dance you learn quickly because the steps are always the same. I learned the dance because it's easy to be haughty in England; it's a national characteristic.

I recall my first meeting with Dr. Mark Philpott, director of the Centre for Medieval and Renaissance studies in Oxford. He pointedly put the stress on the AY sound in RennAYssance as a reminder to us Americans who consistently flout their vernacular standards. Those details, those pretentious miniscules, reinforced my

feelings of ignorance and awe. Philpott, a robust man who was forced to turn sideways to walk through narrow doors, talked as though his mouth were capable of opening but the size of a grape. His vowels were dark, and he mumbled almost clumsily. This man, with his obesity and bumbling madness, incited terror in our summa cum laude American guts. We Americans-abroad felt not only ignorant, but wholly to blame for our negative stereotype, so we spent our months aiming to disavow any direct associations with an American way of things. Of course we gave ourselves away every day with the pronouncement of each syllable, but there was something in the trying—in that thousandth cup of Sainsbury's tea, in saying “trousers” and “half-past”—that stripped us of our bad taste and horrendous vocabulary and vile eating habits for moments at a time. In these moments we felt we could accomplish something vital for our nation: we could prove Europe otherwise. “Take that,” we thought, sitting comfortably in the bi-level McDonald's on Cornmarket Street—the one straight down from the Burger King and KFC and neighboring Lincoln College, established in 1497.

I head north to Edinburgh after a few months at Oxford and feel I should make a significant cultural purchase of some kind. I amble through a line of identical souvenir shops, rifling through barrels of cheap wool scarves and t-shirts with Highland cows doodled across the chest. I am the only one in the last shop, and the red-haired girl at the counter looks about my age.

“Any clan in particular you're looking for?” she asks in charming cockney syllables.

I say I like the light blue and yellow.

The Stuarts will be happy to know that their tartan colors are popular this season at Pottery Barn. I buy the Stuart blanket for fifteen pounds. The wool is heavy and uncomfortable, like a drunken man's breath.

Charlie shakes my hand and slurs a salutation. I tell Charlie my name is Lindsay, and he grimaces, says he is at odds with me. I assume he means the Scottish clan Lindsay, and I make sure he knows that Marks is my family name and I'm not a communist. Daniel had met Charlie at the urinals in the upstairs bathroom of an Edinburgh pub. The others let Charlie buy them drinks while I waft the smell of yeast and barley to my nose and lean in to hear Charlie preach. He slaps the boys on the back like they're in that scene from *Moby Dick*—the old one with Gregory Peck. These drunkards are so trustworthy—I let Charlie jab his wrinkly fingers in my face and talk about how three hundred years ago he fought alongside William Wallace in the battle of Stirling Bridge against those bastard British. Undoubtedly, this old man has been hitting the same pub for 36 years, and he always gets a pint of Guinness, which could be cliché, but it isn't. We let Charlie impress us with his knowledge of European history and especially WWII, which came up because he thinks Daniel is Jewish—he's Mexican, but Charlie is compassionately massaging Daniel's shoulder and referring to the Jews as "your people." In wooden pubs on steeply winding streets, Charlie lives as though 1297 was his childhood and Robert the Bruce his cricket captain. When Charlie's drunk he doesn't remember the

difference between two blurred histories. Charlie leaves us to slouch near the bar, and we ask the pubkeeper to tell us about him – does he come here often, what does he do for a living, etc. She'll only tell us that "he's a very important man." We pry, but she offers nothing. She looks at me and raises one wet finger, the other four gripping a beer-stained towel. "Here in the pub, everyone's equal. It doesn't matter who he is." The wisest woman in Scotland, I think.

A young kid with strong, attractive features sits across the way from me, naming all of the American football teams. He is Welsh and camping on the Gower Peninsula with his friends for the night. They want to talk about California, but I've never been there. No scene in my lifetime is as definitively dramatic and deeply soaked into my mind as the Gower cliffs retreating into the expanse of the sea. The young kid and his friends are laughing at me and saying, "Why would you come to Wales? There's nothing to *do!*" Nothing to do. No Disneyworld.

I ask the young man what he wants to be when he gets older. He smiles wide. "I want to be an American."

Bussing away from Gloucester Green doesn't ache the way I thought it would. I notice a man talking on the phone, speaking Spanish. I put on headphones and listen to Joni Mitchell until the batteries die. Arriving into Gatwick Airport, I wrestle my two bags marked "CAUTION: OVERSIZED LOAD. GET HELP LIFTING" from the storage compartment to the concrete. These bags and three carry-ons spill over with Christmas presents and gnarled 90-pence paperbacks. I

Ain't That America

realize I am breaking every rule so resolutely enforced by Northwest airlines, but I am prepared to create a scene in intense Oxfordian syllables in order to keep all three heaving carry-ons in tow.

The Spanish-speaking man approaches me grinning. “Where in the States are you from?” He hoists my bags onto a cart.

“I’m from Michigan.” I don’t bother making the mitten shape with my hand.

“I have friends near Michigan,” he manages.

“Oh yeah? Do you know where?”

“Texas,” he smiles. He knew he had connected with me.

I’ve never been to Texas, but it doesn’t matter; I know what he meant. Whether he knows it or not, he meant “Texas, Michigan...it’s all the same.” Ah, sweet America. It’s impossible to scrub out the smell even after four months of sudsy Oxfordian scholarship. How shall I conduct myself *now*? What am I to carry home besides a blanket too rough and books full of worthy side-notes?

Here’s home, and I know one application, one difference or relief or satisfaction. Back in Michigan – back in middle-America, the land of milk, cancer-causing agents, and honey – the pressure is off to sing for my tea.