

# **FICKLE WINDS AND TREACHEROUS FEELINGS: ANGLO-AMERICAN RELATIONS AND THE EARLY CHALLENGES FOR THE AMERICA'S CUP**

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And yet, when the last act of injustice had been committed, when the last bitter word had been spoken, and the last venomous drop of ink had stained the page of history, when the last gun had been fired, and the white stars of hope and peace had replaced the red cross of St George, even then, there remained a bond of union that no human power could put asunder.<sup>1</sup>

On 22 August 1851 fifteen British vessels and one New York 'Pilot Boat', named perhaps appropriately, *America*, raced around the Isle of Wight. The prize was an ornate silver cup worth 100 Guineas and pragmatically called the '100 Guinea Cup'. The name might have been prosaic but the result was a little more dramatic: *America* was victorious.<sup>2</sup> This seemingly innocuous yacht race heralded the start of one of the most bitterly contested and in many instances throughout its 141 year history, quite ludicrous international sporting events. In 1857 the 100 Guinea Cup was handed over to the New York Yacht Club (NYYC) as trustees and renamed the America's Cup. The first challenge was in 1870 by Englishman James Ashbury. The twenty- nine challenges that have followed have all been, with few exceptions, renowned for non-sporting decisions, sharp practice, slanderous allegations, cheating and excessive expenditure.<sup>3</sup>

The history of the early British challenges for the America's Cup provide an opportunity to explore further the concept of Canadian sport sociologist Rick Gruneau that sports are both constitutive of, and constituting, society.<sup>4</sup>Such an analytical framework allows a discussion

of the America's Cup in relation to American and British culture, both constitutive of and constituting Anglo-American relations. This article will also examine the many aspects of mid to late nineteenth century Anglo-American relations. An overview of the early contests for the America's Cup reveals much about British and North American perceptions of their own evolving sporting values and traditions.

Yachting symbolised for wealthy Americans and Britains alike, wealth, civilisation and power. It played a key role in creating the 'egoistic' atmosphere of nineteenth century America's Cup contests. Juxtaposed with yachting was the notion of 'democratic' sportsmanship. The British refuted any claims to sportsmanship by their American rivals. The Americans for their part contended that clouded monocles and arrogance meant their British competitors could neither read nor play by the rules. Elitism, nationalism, insecurity and naivety produce a volatile cocktail, and the America's Cup was a product of them all.<sup>5</sup>

### **United Yet Divided: a history of Anglo-American sporting relations**

To understand the emergence of the America's Cup it is essential to explore the broader context of Anglo-American relationships. The American War of Independence is an initial point of departure; it was here American culture struck her nascent but tenacious blows for recognition and equality, or, as it appeared to many Victorian Britons, superiority.

America, in part due to British military weakness at sea, became in 1785 an independent nation. With the mother country defeated, the ex-colony was now free to exploit its abundant natural resources and prove to 'her cousins' that the New World was every bit as resourceful and efficient as the Old. America wasted little time in making her point. During the Napoleonic Wars in the early 1790s American ships cheated British naval blockades and supplied a starving France with grain. The short war of 1812 once again saw America the victor.<sup>6</sup>Peace made little difference to young America's urge to win; in the 1840s America

responded eagerly to the discourse of President Andrew Jackson: 'American's must better and defeat the old world'. Reiterating the Jacksonian rhetoric, the *New York Herald* informed its readers on 26 October 1866 that 'real Americans are never satisfied until they have improved upon foreign customs'. Improve, better or defeat, Americans were not satisfied unless they were first.<sup>7</sup>

By the 1850s American clippers dominated the tea trade. In 1851 the schooner *America* defeated Britain's elite in a race around the Isle of Wight. The American Civil War again proved a stumbling block for the Old World. Declaring herself a neutral nation, the British underestimated North American tenacity when they allowed the Confederate Cruiser *Alabama* to be built and deployed at Birkenhead. The demise of the Confederacy in 1865 resulted in the North claiming £3.25 million in damages (attributed to the action of the *Alabama*) against the British government.<sup>8</sup>

Geographically, and now commercially large, America had by the 1890s become a central player in international markets and foreign affairs. Symbol of democracy, the New World stood for everything the old did not; classlessness, equality, youth, meritocracy and dynamism. Simultaneously fascinating and repulsive, the British might not have welcomed the American presence but by the 1860s they had little choice but to acknowledge it.<sup>9</sup>

On the other side of the Atlantic the Old World revelled in the heady days of the British empire. Americans might have despised their British counterparts and indeed had beaten them on a number of occasions but this had done little to dissuade the British that they and they alone ruled the 'Empire', ocean, banking, trading, and manufacturing activities of the world. Dismissing Americans as uncouth, humourless, money-grabbing cads, upper-class Britons prided themselves that while many of their European neighbours had succumbed to revolution the 'Great British Empire' continued to wax.<sup>10</sup>

If 'Rule Britannia' echoed around the halls of power, whether commerce, politics or industry, it literally bellowed forth across the

playing fields, rivers and cricket pitches of not only the Mother Country but her Empire. Britain's 'natural' and inevitable sporting supremacy failed to impress her American rivals. Sport for them, just like wars, trade or commerce was another avenue for beating, bettering or defeating the Old World. Is it any wonder then that sporting clashes less bloody than military wars were no less fierce?'<sup>11</sup> Sport offered an excellent platform for nationalist sentiments, partisan support and open, although supposedly non-hostile, contact between two nations whose pasts to use a cliché, were 'united yet divided'. If sport allowed American muscle to flex, it provided ample opportunity for British venom to be spat.

In 1895 American 'savages' invaded one of England's hallowed shrines: the Henley Regatta. Spectators were not amused when following a win the Cornell rowers broke into their college yell. Such 'Red Indian savagery' was felt unfit for English ears. If regatta goes at Henley cringed at the vociferous chanting of the Cornell men those watching America's Cup races must have shuddered at the banter of ferry captains; 'Here you are ladies and gents. Ten minutes view of the Valkyrie, Lord Dunraven and his daughter, all for a quarter'.<sup>12</sup> Other 'pure Americanisms' included 'go tiger' and 'coming up'. Not every Britisher was perturbed by American boisterous barracking. While the meanings of these slogans may have been lost on the 1870 challenger James Ashbury, he thought that the American mob seemed friendly enough.<sup>13</sup>

American sportsmen were also, according to the *Sportsman* of 28 September 1887, 'thoroughly imbued with their own smartness' and 'determined to lick all creation, especially English creation'. Even the syndicate (led by John Cox Stevens, Commodore of the New York Yacht Club) responsible for the presence of the *America* in British waters in 1851, was described, 'as cautious and gentlemanly persons - as downright cute and keen as the smartest in the States'.<sup>14</sup> British defeat at the hands of Stevens's and Co. was felt by the *Times* of 25 August 1851 to exemplify British grace and sportsmanship: British fair play obviously did not

include character references for one's rivals! Whether playing at home or away, British ridicule of American manners remained poignant and candid. During Lord Dunraven's challenge in 1893 the British sporting press likened his Lordship's team to, 'missionaries', whose evangelical work included christianising the pagan hordes of American journalists.<sup>15</sup>

### **British sporting ideals and values**

Much of British resentment, contention and even fear over her younger rival stemmed from a fear of the American version of democracy. Mobs and democracy went hand in hand as far as upper- class Britons were concerned. The 'rabble', a very pronounced element in America, was the inevitable product of a democratic society.<sup>16</sup>

By contrast, in England, *Guest* suggested in 1903 that 'the test of superiority is not looked for in the actual worth of a thing, but in the number of people who can be prevented from enjoying it'. British responses to American 'aggressive egalitarianism' were firmly rooted in the belief that 'elite implied limited'.<sup>17</sup> If everything was available to all then quantity, rather than quality, would prevail.<sup>18</sup> How could people not imbued with the qualities of a British gentleman know what was good for them? The moral plane of the cultured elite was thought beyond plebeian intelligence. Guiding the masses was the responsibility of the upper classes, so was maintaining the exclusivity of elite life. If the only arbiter of success was the market, people would get what they wanted, not necessarily what they should have: anarchy and chaos would result.<sup>19</sup> Unfortunately America had not degenerated into mob rule which only made democracy a more bitter pill to swallow.

British beliefs manifested themselves in many ways. Apart from Americans being savages, they were also cads, cheats, liars, who indulged in 'sharp practice' and were incapable of 'sporting values or gestures'; 'heathen' who knew little about the finer things in life and cared even less: in short- ill-mannered, uncultured philistines. What else

could a democratic society produce? How could Americans, wealthy or otherwise, ever reach the moral plain of the British gentleman? Without culture, class or breeding, how could such people 'play the game'?<sup>20</sup> Many were convinced, as a letter to the *Field* of 5 October 1895 demonstrated, that Americans could neither participate, spectate nor organise games, let alone play them:

Will Englishmen have their eyes opened. It is difficult for a people, true as they are to the rigid precepts of honour, to realise that a community allied to themselves exists, where all the higher principles which makes a peaceful life possible between man and man, are so in abeyance as they are in the United States, and where the friendship which England feels for her uncultured offspring, is met by a sentiment of inexplicable hatred and jealousy ... It is all very well to talk about heredity and cousinship, and all that sort of thing; but these people have no inheritance of sportsmanship.

The writer concluded that yachting had been completely 'debased' by these 'ingenious people'. Its noble attributes will remain lost until Americans are either 'barred or civilised up to the key of generosity, honour, and fair dealing'. At present every meeting between the humble peoples of England is seized by Americans as an 'excuse for gratifying their general hatred of finer England, Englishmen, and English institutions'.

Sport as far as the British were concerned was sacrosanct. They not only ruled the waves, but the rivers, the football fields, cricket pitches and athletic tracks. Americans made it patently obvious that British sports were not necessarily the best. They rejected cricket and football, degraded, according to British opinion, rowing, racing, billiards, whist, and chess.<sup>21</sup> Any sport contaminated by uncivilised American hands was considered doomed. Bearing such feelings in mind it is perhaps easier to comprehend the tension and conflict that occurred when the nations of the old and new world met.

The reality of British sport was never as lofty as these ideals suggested. Some of the leading amateur sportsmen of Victorian England, notably the cricketer W G Grace, were guilty of ‘sharp practice’. Even some British yachtsmen were not above ‘bending’ the rules in their favour. The fast recorded yacht race on the Solent in 1829 resulted in Lord Belfast ordering his crew to disable his competitor’s yacht with axes after the two had become entangled. Talented yacht designer G L Watson alarmed Americans in 1887 when *Thistle* measured 1.6. feet longer than she was supposed to. Watson and his employer Bell pleaded ignorance, but such claims must be treated with scepticism given the talents of the designer in question and Bell’s professional approach to the challenge.<sup>22</sup> Finally Lord Dunraven’s antics in 1895 did not conform to British notions of a sportsman and a gentleman. He not only failed to assist a yacht in distress but insisted, in the opinion of *Yachtsman* of 14 November 1895, in levelling ‘accusations’ impossible to prove.

### **Democratic sportsmanship: The American perspective**

Formed in 1844 the New York Yacht Club (NYCC) not only reflected the ‘the competitive atmosphere’ of democratic America, it also reflected the desires of Commodore John Cox Stevens and other founding members.<sup>23</sup> Neither the NYCC nor *America* were developed as social ventures; the latter fulfilled Steven’s wishes to build a yacht that ‘would lick all creation’, the former assisted through organised regattas, design innovation, and competition to achieve such aims.<sup>24</sup> American competitiveness extended well beyond the elite walls of the NYCC. As Cox Stevens mounted the first international yachting challenge in 1851 he was warned by acquaintances, including Horace Greely, editor of the *NEW York Tribune*, not to return if beaten: Stevens did not have *America* built merely to participate !!<sup>25</sup> Winning, whether in the board room or boat was what nineteenth century America was all about. If rules had to be broken then so be it. Participation got you nowhere. To win at any

cost, especially against the British was the ‘name of the game’. Even expatriate Charlie Barr realised this. A Scotsman and outstanding racing skipper Barr became an American citizen while racing America’s Cup defenders during the late nineteenth century. His illegal but effective tactics at the helm of *Columbia* in 1901 were described as ‘violating the rules of civilised warfare’. Such antics pleased his boss C Oliver Iselin who favoured neither sporting nor passive skippers.<sup>26</sup> ‘British challengers’, noted the *Field* of 19 November 1887, continuously ‘underestimated their hosts’. Americans made sure such complacency was never reciprocated.

C Oliver Iselin and his predecessor General Paine were of the same breed. They were also of the same background and class. America’s ‘nouveau riche’, whether the established Brahman families of New England, or Mrs Astors ‘400 Club’ welcomed yachts and yachting as a quintessential ingredient of ‘conspicuous consumption’. The America’s Cup had an added bonus: what better way to justify frivolous expenditure on steam yachts, racing yachts, parties, and social soirées than to do it in the name of national pride?

The NYCC became the ‘ultimate club’, the pinnacle of ‘fashionable society’.<sup>27</sup> Its membership list proved an accurate barometer for New York’s and Europe’s fashionable sets; alongside Astors, Belmonts, Vanderbilts, and the President, were King Edward VII, Marquis of Dufferin and Ava, Grand Duke Alexis of Russia, and Prince Bernadotte (Count of Wisborg).<sup>28</sup> From the 1880s onwards one thing above all signified ‘social success’: requiring wealth, time, commitment, providing a stage for nationalist rhetoric and public spectacle it was seen as a serious endeavour rather than a frivolous expenditure. Defending the America’s Cup had become the coveted crown of the social kingdom.<sup>29</sup>

It would be perhaps naive to suggest that C Oliver Iselin and General Paine had little interest in the social niceties associated with the America’s Cup by the 1870s. Both emanated from established wealthy families, and both would have enjoyed the benefits whether in social or

business terms that the ‘Gilded Age’ offered wealthy fashionable Americans. What appears to differentiate Paine and Iselin from their wealthy contemporaries like financier and banker, J P Morgan (Commodore of the NYCC, 1897-9), is that they could actually sail, enjoyed it and were good at it. Brought up the ‘hard way’ sailing ‘sand baggers’, both learnt how to run, sail, and race these demanding little boats with great skill in an often ruthless environment.<sup>30</sup> It was their ‘sailing background’ and genuine interest in racing yachts that made them such imposing adversaries. If Americans ever doubted the ability of their America’s Cup yachts, they had no cause to doubt the management and organisational techniques of Paine and Iselin. Yachting by its very nature is a ‘risky business’: tides change, seas are unpredictable, and the breeze fickle, both Paine and Iselin always managed to reduce the odds. They certainly knew all the tricks.

A Bostonian, Paine, managed the yachts *Puritan* in 1885, *Mayflower* 1886, and *Volunteer* 1887. A stickler for detail he once planed one fourth of an inch off the deck of a yacht he believed was too heavy.<sup>31</sup> In 1893 the General’s yacht failed to win the honour of defending the America’s Cup. His thorough preparation and professionalism had not only been matched but had been surpassed by C Oliver Iselin.

Described as a ‘haughty man’, Iselin’s reign over Cup defenders began in 1893 with *Vigilant*, which said Iselin, was built ‘to successfully defend the America’s Cup whatever the cost’.<sup>32</sup> Concerned that *Vigilant* should be ‘shipshape’ prior to the Cup races in 1893 and not wishing to leave anything undone ‘likely to aid his rival, Lord Dunraven’s, success’, Iselin slept on board before each race.<sup>33</sup> Concerned with saving weight in 1899 he left the American defender *Columbia* unpainted.<sup>34</sup> Even being described during the 1895 contest by Lord Dunraven as an ‘unsporting trickster’ did not ruffle the American. ‘The better boat won’, commented Iselin: his boat.<sup>35</sup>

The story behind the British camp was somewhat different. As Paine fretted over *Mayflower* being too heavy in 1886, Lieutenant and Mrs Henn remained bemused at the General’s dilemma. The Hennis

lived on board the British America's Cup challenger, *Galatea*. Their pet dog lived on board too, so did their monkey, a number of potted plants, settees, couches, beds, piano, bath tub, rugs and ornaments. Upper-class Victorian homes were not renowned for their sparseness, the yacht *Galatea* was no exception. It is perhaps not surprising that the nearest the hapless but comfortable Hennis got to their American rivals was to finish sixteen minutes behind.<sup>36</sup> As Iselin boarded *Vigilant* for the night in 1893 Lord Dunraven was chauffeured to the Atlantic Yacht Club for dinner.<sup>37</sup>

It is perhaps the British challenger Sir Richard Sutton when sailing in 1885, who exemplified British sportsmanship and the desire to participate rather than compete more than any other challenger. Failing to win a race, Sutton's 'British pluck, manliness and courage' gained the admiration and respect of 'all' Americans when he declined a 'walk over' against *Puritan*. Due more to aggressive starting tactics than poor seamanship *Puritan* collided with Sutton's yacht *Genesta* and became disabled. The obvious rule infringement left the NYYC little option but to award the race to Sutton. In true British sporting style Sutton stated, 'no, no we don't want that sort of thing, we don't want a walk over we want a race'. Even Paine's offer to pay for the damage done to *Genesta* was politely refused. The Americans admired Sutton's actions, noting they had expected nothing less from a British gentleman who wanted only a 'fair field and no favour'.<sup>38</sup>

Scottish challenger James Bell in 1887 however played differently. A Scotsman and American import magnate, Bell felt that the only way to 'play against' the Americans was to play like them and proposed a syndicate build two boats, race them together and create the American 'esprit d' corps' so necessary to win the cup.<sup>39</sup> The Scotsman did just that, though the second boat, largely due to a lack of funds, was never realised. Once again the British were soundly defeated; and it is interesting to note that Paine preferred the Hennis and Sir Richard Sutton as competitors to Bell.<sup>40</sup> In 1899 Sir Thomas Lipton was not as fortunate as General Paine had been in 1885; Lipton's yacht *Shamrock*

I became disabled as she raced against *Columbia*. Under Iselin's command *Columbia* sailed on claiming the race.

The actions of Sutton clearly highlight the differences and ambiguities that British and American America's Cup campaigns engendered on each side. Young America still smarting from her colonial scares felt justified, and in many instances rightly so, in beating the 'mother country'.<sup>41</sup> Winning was what nineteenth century America was all about. Supremacy over the hated, but in many ways admired 'old world' was the ultimate reward. Such contradictions were exemplified by incidents like that of Lord Dunraven, who, suffering from gout in 1893 appeared with one foot in a soft slipper. New York's fashionable set immediately donned one slipper, after all a British Lord would surely flaunt the latest fashions.<sup>42</sup> At the same time the efforts of America's 'nouveau riche' to buy up as much of European and British culture as possible and to ship it brick by brick, bauble by bauble to America allowed British elites to reconfirm their beliefs that America was uncivilised, uncouth and uncultured.

Yachting as an activity and sport served only to enhance such sensitive feelings. If sport and civilisation went hand in hand, the nobler the sport the healthier and wealthier the nation, then yachting was the sport of the Gods, the civilised pastime of a cultured people.<sup>43</sup> Fostered by sovereigns, practised by nobles, yachting was the 'true patriotic' sport of the greatest maritime nation. Britain alone stood 'distinguished pre-eminently' in the art of yacht building and science of sailing.<sup>44</sup> No country especially one as young, rough and uncivilised as America could appreciate or participate in such a sport. America's patronage of yachting signified to British and European elites she was no longer a 'frontier nation', a sprawling wilderness, but had reached a level of development which enabled her elites to participate in a sport demanding wealth, time and skill. The importance of the sport itself cannot be over emphasised. American elites had continued to dominate the seas at a time when the British felt they ruled the waves; a burgeoning Empire was painful proof of this.<sup>45</sup> Americans had not merely defeated

a British yacht in the eight challenges between 1870 and 1899 they had defeated Britain's elite. Britannia might have ruled the waves and the Empire but on the Eastern coast of North America 'the eagle screamed' while the lion simply sat and growled.<sup>46</sup>

## Conclusions

In 1870 Englishman James Ashbury sailed his schooner *Cambria* against seventeen American vessels for the America's Cup. *Cambria* eventually finished despite repeated interference by some American yachts.<sup>47</sup> Undeterred Ashbury returned in 1871. Although, largely due to Ashbury's tenacity, one-on-one was now the rule, the Americans had reserved the right to pick one of three boats depending on the wind and sea conditions for each of the three races: the Americans won.<sup>48</sup> In 1895 Lord Dunraven accused Iselin and by default the NYCC of illegally tampering with *Defender* after the races had started. Dunraven's accusations were published and read on both sides of the Atlantic.<sup>49</sup> There is little doubt that Iselin 'bent' the rules: Dunraven's actions were equally as manipulative: blame lay with both sides.

This article has attempted to explore why since its inception the America's Cup generated considerable passion on both sides of the Atlantic. One answer lies in the intricate and volatile nature of Anglo-American relations in this era. The fuse in relation to the America's Cup was yachting itself. British elites were regularly beaten in a sport at which they felt themselves supreme. If defeats could be accepted, the manner in which they were achieved made British lips quiver. Americans-built yachts were fashioned not to sail around the Solent or winter in the Mediterranean but to compete and win. Americans produced racing craft: boats in a lot of cases which would not have weathered an Atlantic crossing but were efficient in the task at hand; defending the America's Cup.<sup>50</sup> Such competitive practices were alien to British yachtsmen, though they too were brought up on the

innate belief in the superiority of the 'mother country' which Americans found objectionable.

Although yachting was a sport for the privileged on both sides of the Atlantic, different sporting ideals emerged because of the social groups attracted to the sport. Yachting attracted old money in Britain and was one of the more aristocratic sports. Those who competed wanted to do so in a gentlemanly fashion. The Scotsman, James Bell, who attempted to match American competitiveness, was an exception to the rule. The sport attracted rather more new money in America, consequently there were new definitions of sporting contests.

Maybe now, the events of 1983 - when America lost the Cup to Australia which at one time involved the efforts of the both the FBI and CIA - can be more easily understood.<sup>51</sup> Politics had long been a central component of the America's Cup. It was not the loss of a silver cup that concerned the Americans, rather it was the loss of an icon that symbolised America's supremacy in the developed world.

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