Gesa Stedman


In the last few years, both French and British historians have been increasingly interested in exploring the connections that unite them with their cross-channel neighbors. This initiative comes not from an exhaustion of research topics in either territory but rather from a desire to follow the trajectories of men and women who, far from constraining themselves within the political, social, and cultural borders of their own kingdoms, overstepped such boundaries and, in so doing, redefined national identities. In terms of modern Europe, such connections were the central topic of an ambitious monograph by Robert and Isabel Tombs, who, in _That Sweet Enemy_ (Portsmouth, 2006), demonstrated how, since the end of the seventeenth century, France and England have entered into a series of diverse cycles of political opposition, cultural _rapprochement_, and even intellectual emulation. More recently, Jonathan Conlin in _Tales of Two Cities: Paris, London and the Birth of the Modern City_ (London, 2013), picking up where Karen Newman in _Cultural Capitals: Early Modern London and Paris_ (Princeton: 2007) and Vanessa Harding in _The Dead and the Living in London and Paris, 1500-1670_ (Cambridge: 2002) left off, has shown that Paris and London, far from being cultural capitals formed in a vacuum, systematically influenced and defined one another, as much through the increasingly common group of travelers who recounted their voyages in publications as through politicians who were self-consciously inspired by the activities of their neighborly counterparts. The central aim of the entire field of the history of relations between the two kingdoms is the further exploration of what François Crouzet has characterized as the “Second Hundred Years War” (_French History_, 1996). The overriding theoretical structure, which dominates the ensemble of cultural and social studies within this domain, is, without doubt, the notion of cultural exchange. The notion of cultural transfer encompasses a spectrum of different degrees of receptivity to, and assimilation of, elements originating elsewhere.

Gesa Stedman’s book situates itself exactly at an intersecting point between the dual influences of deepening of Anglo-French relations and the theorization of the notion of cultural exchange. The primary aim of this work is to demonstrate that long before the “Second Hundred Years War,” the markers of social and cultural exchange between the two countries were already well in place, and Stedman undertakes to use such markers as an entry point into British culture in order to exemplify French influences. It must be understood that this is not a book which flits between France and England, that is
it does not attach itself to that tendency known as “entangled history.” Rather, Steadman’s work identifies moments in seventeenth-century British history when the kingdom was sensitive to French influences through those figures that Roger Chartier has rightly characterized as cultural mediators. But in the present work, given that at points it exclusively focuses on characters from the same social category (sovereigns), it might have been better to characterize such interactions as the tangible confrontation of social equals of two cultural worlds each marked by the traditions and practices which were dulled and influenced through coming into contact with the other.

The work is divided into three large chapters, preceded by an introduction. Each chapter is independent of the others and can be read independently. Chapter two contains an in depth study of Queen Henrietta Maria, daughter of the first Bourbon King Henry IV and Maria de Medici, and given in marriage to Charles I in 1625. Marked both by the Italian heritage of her mother and the formal nature of the late-sixteenth and early-seventeenth-century French curial environment, she arrived in England with a particular conception of court life where etiquette, good manners, and elegance should be exhibited in court behavior, in entertainments, and also in the manner in which courtiers approached and interacted with the king and queen. It was this heritage that Henrietta Maria brought to England, and it is this moment of cultural confrontation that Stedman explores magnificently. More than a cultural ambassador, the queen set to work rendering the English court more joyful and livelier, with more original and agreeable forms of entertainment.

The third chapter, “Charles II and Anglo-French Culture at the Restoration,” explores the rather more ambivalent attitude towards the sovereign that prevailed during the Restoration, which swayed between admiration and imitation of French manners and rejection and criticism of them. Furthermore, this period saw the arrival in England of tens of thousands of Huguenots, fleeing the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685, which forced French Protestants to seek refuge on the other side of channel. The social pressure enforced by this new elite who arrived at the English court constituted a second wave of French influence. However, long before this, Charles II was already regarding Louis XIV with envy. Moreover, as the author reminds us “love of Women, Ease and Pleasure would set the tone for Restoration gender relations” (65). The attitude of Charles towards these novelties, the spaces they created such as the parks, shops, theaters and restaurants, and the material culture these inspired such as new forms of music, dance, food and drink, is the central focus of this chapter. Finally the fourth chapter, the longest and densest, turns to visual and textual culture to seek evidence for cultural exchange. Through a great range of texts and images, such as Samuel Butler’s *Satire upon Our Ridiculous Imitation of the*