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# EMPIRES OF THE WORD

*A Language History of the World*

NICHOLAS OSTLER



HarperCollins *Publishers*

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## MICROCOSM OR DISTORTING MIRROR?

until recently of the opinion that phonics are more confusing than helpful when teaching children to read and write: hence the notorious 'Look and Say' method, which essentially treated each word as if it were a Chinese character.

As with Chinese, one can say that, for learners, the English language has been literate too long.

### *Westward Ho!*

The language I have learned these forty years,  
My native English, now I must forego:  
And now my tongue's use is to me no more  
Than an unstring'd viol or a harp;  
Or like a cunning instrument cas'd up,  
Or, being open, put into his hands  
That knows no touch to tune the harmony:  
Within my mouth you have engaol'd my tongue,  
Doubly portcullis'd with my teeth and lips;  
And dull, unfeeling, barren ignorance  
Is made my gaoler to attend on me.  
I am too old to fawn upon a nurse,  
Too far in years to be a pupil now:  
What is thy sentence, then, but speechless death,  
Which robs my tongue from breathing native breath?

(The Duke of Norfolk, on being exiled)  
Shakespeare, *Richard II*, act I, scene iii

Norfolk's words stand as the first example of an Englishman's despair, now almost traditional, at the prospect of having to learn another language: could exile hold any greater terror? English was then a language spoken exclusively within the confines of the British Isles. When the words were written, most likely in 1595, there had been only a single English-speaking colony outside the British Isles, Raleigh's 1586 colony at Roanoke, 'Virginia', and no one in England then knew if it was still in existence.\*

\* It, and the island of Croatoan, to which it famously but mysteriously decamped, were actually on the coast of modern North Carolina. The few survivors, merging with local Algonquian speakers, were to drop their English in the seventeenth century. But English did survive in the follow-up colony at Jamestown, later moved to Williamsburg.



Little by little, it was going to become more and more unnecessary for travellers from Britain to learn other languages, because English speakers were now to spread new settlements around the world, and many of those settlements were going to expand, to become—with Britain—among the largest, richest and most powerful nations on earth. The motives for British settlements over three centuries were various: the glory of the realm, gains from piracy, founding new utopias, wealth from agriculture or mining, trade, personal glory, a stirring of duty to spread the gospel, global strategy, windfall spoils from military victories, even in the end some sense of obligation to educate the native inhabitants. In this, they were unlike their greatest predecessors, the Portuguese, the Spanish, the Dutch and the French, who were each moved by just one or a few of these. The British were in this sense the universal exponents of European imperialism.\* And the sheer variety of the motives could almost be parleyed into a claim of no motive at all. In 1883, the publicist Sir John Seeley was famously to claim: 'We seem, as it were, to have conquered and peopled half the world in a fit of absence of mind.'<sup>16</sup> This has well suited British conceits of their own virtuous innocence.

### *Pirates and planters*

The first extensions of the English language across the Atlantic recall the stirrings of Sanskrit across the Bay of Bengal a millennium and a half before, when glamorous *sāhasikāh* pirates could scarce be distinguished from *sādhavaḥ* merchants (see Chapter 5, 'The spread of Sanskrit', p. 199). Britain was the last of the Atlantic-fronting powers to seek new fortune in the west, and it was not, at first, an easy game to break into. In the sixteenth century, when Spain was drawing vast profits from its mines in Mexico and Peru, and Portugal stitching up the trade of the Indian Ocean, when even France was exploring the extent of the St Lawrence river, England's Henry VIII and Elizabeth I had supported a very few exploratory voyages across the North Atlantic which yielded nothing, hardly even a landfall. But Francis Drake had discovered a line that could be profitable, euphemistically known as the 'taking of prizes'. In fifteen years from 1573 he alone had brought back, from a mixture of raids on Spanish ports, high-sea robberies of Spanish and Portuguese ships, and trading in the East Indies, booty to the value of three quarters of a million pounds, twice the annual tax revenues at the time; Elizabeth's share was enough to clear the national debt in 1581, and provide another

\* It is interesting to note that one major motive for Rome and Russia, the drive to secure borders by conquering neighbours, was largely absent.

£42,000 to found the Levant Company (which went on to become the financial basis of the East India Company itself).<sup>17</sup> And he was not alone. From 1585 to 1604, at least a hundred ships set off every year to plunder the Caribbean, netting at least £200,000 a year.<sup>18</sup>

But one thing that the Elizabethan voyages had shown was that lines of supply were the point of greatest weakness in any long expedition. Even piracy, in the long term, calls for a secure base, defensible and self-sustaining, but close to the action. And this was prominent in the rationale offered in the prospectus to investors for Raleigh's newly planted colony in Virginia, written by Richard Hakluyt in 1584. In the executive summary,\* after pieties about 'the inlargement of the gospell of Christe', and the Spanish threat to decent 'englishe Trades ... growen beggerly or daungerous', he promises that 'this westerne voyadge will yelde unto us all the commodities of Europe, Africa, and Asia'; most especially, '5. That this voyage will be a great bridle to the Indies of the kinge of Spaine and a means that wee may arreste at our pleasure for the space of tenne weekes or three monethes every yere, one or twoo hundred saile of his subjectes shippes at the fysshinge in Newfounde lande.'

In the way of business plans, it did not turn out quite like that. The colony was at first hard put to it even to grow its own food, and survive the attentions of the Indians; it had no energy, indeed no ships, to harry the Spanish. But Hakluyt's term *planting*, originally just an elegant metaphor for 'colony', became in the event very appropriate: the Virginia colony, once re-established at Jamestown, was to find its sustenance through the commercial plantation of tobacco. And although English royal sponsorship of piracy ended when James I came to the throne, this was not the only pirate base that came good in the end through commercial agriculture. British naval strength grew through the seventeenth century, and Britain was able to take possession of some of the islands of the Caribbean, until then really a Spanish lake: most importantly, Jamaica was captured in 1655. At first, piracy targeted on the Spanish remained the major British activity in the region. But increasingly, Britons were noticing the potential in producing sugar, an Asian crop that the

\* The term is an anachronism, but the concept is not. Hakluyt organises the document, *Discourse of Western Planting*, with all the striking content on the second page, chapter headings that tell it all:

A particuler discourse concerninge the greate necessitie and manifolde comodities that are like to growe to this Realme of Englande by the Westerne discoveries lately attempted, Written In the yere 1584 by Richarde Hackluyt of Oxforde at the requeste and direction of the righte worshipfull Mr. Walter Raghly [Raleigh] nowe Knight, before the comynge home of his Twoo Barkes: and is devided into xxi chapiters, the Titles whereof followe in the nexte leafe.

Portuguese had pioneered in Brazil. Henry Morgan, the most famous pirate of them all, invested the proceeds of his freebootery in Nicaragua, Cuba and Venezuela to buy land in Jamaica; Morgan ended up a sugar baron, with a knighthood to boot.<sup>19</sup>

The possession of land, taken for whatever reason, made possible commercial cultivation of exotic crops for the European market. There was no gold or silver in the British possessions, but supplying consumers rather than bankers turned out to be much better business. Cultivating crops also meant that a workforce was needed: if these were indentured workers from Britain (as most were at first, especially in North America), they would of course go on speaking English; if they were purchased slaves from the western coast of Africa, they would learn it when they arrived, since all links with their home communities were lost. The revenues from sugar, and later cocoa, in the Caribbean islands, and from tobacco, and later indigo and cotton, in the North American continent, became the firmest foundations of sustainable English-speaking communities across the Atlantic.

### *Someone else's land*

They call Old England **Acawmenoakit**, which is as much as from *the land on t'other side*. Hardly are they brought to believe that water is three thousand English miles over.

...

**Chauquoock**; a knife. Whence they call Englishmen **Chauquaquoock**, that is *Knife-men*; stone formerly being to them instead of knives, awl-blades, hatchets, and hoes.

...

**Wunnaumwayean**; if he says true. Canonicus, the old Sachim of the Narroganset bay, a wise and peaceable prince, once in a solemn oration to myself, in a solemn assembly, using this word, said, 'I have never suffered any wrong to be offered to the English, since they landed, nor never will.' He often repeated this word, '**Wunnaumwayean Englishman**, if *the Englishman speak true*, if he mean truly then shall I go to my grave in peace, and hope that the English and my posterity will live in love and peace together.' I replied, that he had no cause. I hoped, to question Englishman's **Wunnaumwauonck**, that is, *faithfulness*, he having had long experience of their friendliness and trustiness. He took a stick, and broke it in ten pieces, and related ten instances, laying down a stick to every instance, which gave him cause thus to fear and say.

...

This question they often put to me: 'Why come the Englishmen hither?' and measuring others by themselves, they say, 'It is because you want firing.' For they, having burnt up the wood in one place, wanting draughts to bring wood to them, are fain to follow the wood, and so remove to a fresh place for the wood's sake.

Roger Williams, *A Key into the Language of America*, 1643<sup>20</sup>

The growth of English in the Caribbean had been achieved with little friction. Very few of the Arawak or Carib population had survived the Spanish take-over of the sixteenth century, and so the English pirates and planters, and the slaves that they imported, were entering an emptied domain. The situation on the North American mainland was very different.

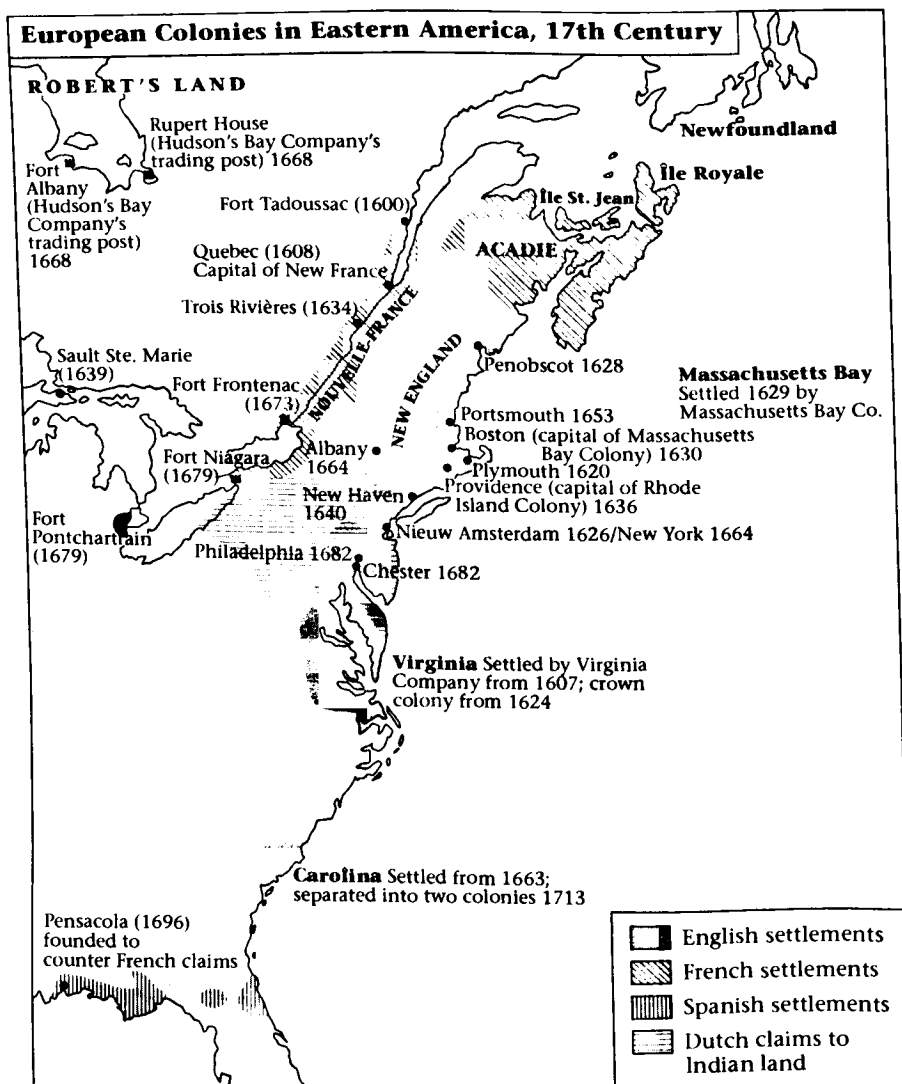
In Virginia and Massachusetts, the first bridgeheads for English settlers, there was still a substantial indigenous population. What with visiting cod fishermen and other scouting voyagers, they were already to some extent familiar with Europeans.\* This was lucky for the settlers, since in both places it was only through the active help of these knowledgeable neighbours that they survived those first years. In Virginia, John Rolfe, who founded the cultivation of tobacco in Virginia, married in 1612 none other than Pocahontas, the spirited daughter of the Powhatan chief Wahunsonacock.† This kept relations with the Powhatan sweet until 1622; in 1616 the couple had even led a party of Virginians to London, where they were presented to King James I. In Massachusetts, the colonists were helped crucially in the first few years by two bilingual natives, Samoset, who had learnt some English from cod fishermen, and Tisquantum. Tisquantum was quite fluent in English, having crossed the Atlantic already six times, spending nine years in England, four in Spain and a further year mapping the New England coast, returning home just a year before the arrival of the English settlers in November 1620.

The task facing the English colonists was quite comparable to the challenge to Cortés and the Spaniards who had invaded Mexico just a century

\* Chesapeake Bay, the site of the Virginia colony, had in fact been the northern boundary of Spanish Jesuit activities in 'la Flórida'. From 1565 this had included small settlements in the modern Georgia, Carolinas and Virginia, but the whole area was abandoned in 1572 after eight missionaries were killed at Chesapeake.

† Pocahontas was in many ways an exceptional woman. Seven years earlier, when still a girl, she had intervened with her father to save the life of another English pioneer, Captain John Smith, who went on to become the Jamestown colony's first governor. When John Rolfe won her hand, she had still been confined against her will on an English ship on the Potomac river. She later became an early convert to Protestant Christianity.

## EMPIRES OF THE WORD



before, to establish themselves, as masters, in the midst of someone else's country. But English motives for being in America were rather different. They were not looking for gold, converts or even dominion. Rather, they were looking for land. This prospect had been the chief inducement for volunteers, ever since Humphrey Gilbert's prospectus for the first failed expedition of 1583. For Englishmen, the intent to create a 'New England' was quite literal, and many showed their earnest by bringing wives and small children out with them.

## MICROCOSM OR DISTORTING MIRROR?

Since they had no interest in the inhabitants, except as intrusted and expendable helpmeets, it was of little concern to them that there was no major overlord fit for conquest in the part of America into which they had projected themselves, nor that—as it happened—the language spoken by the first inhabitants they met was actually very widespread there and far beyond: they were more struck by the fact that the language as they encountered it was highly riven dialectally, which meant that even those few who made the effort to learn to speak it could scarcely be understood when they wandered farther afield:

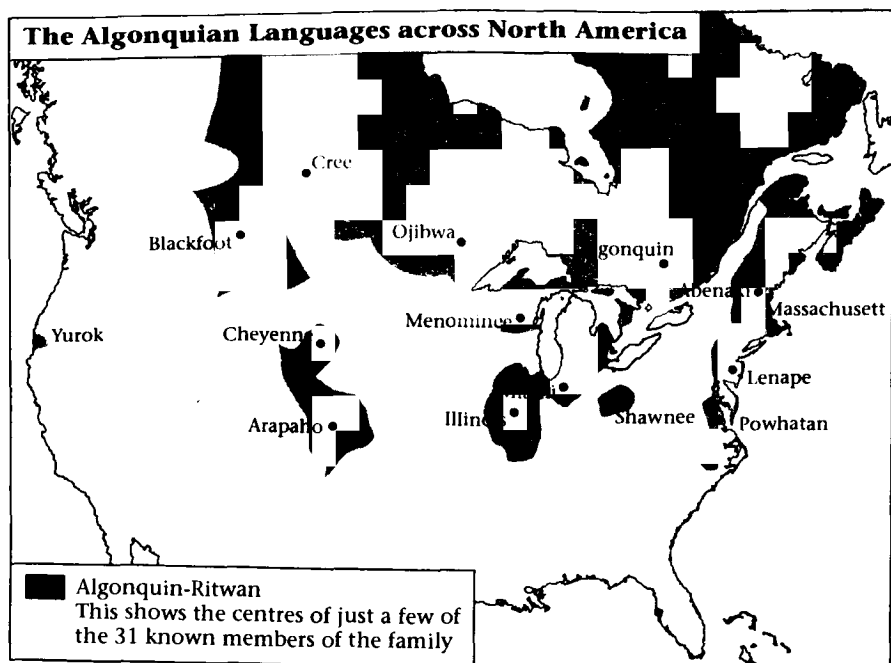
I once travelled to an island of the wildest in our parts ... I was alone having travelled from my bark, the wind being contrary; and little could I speak to them to their understanding, especially because of the change of their dialect and manner of speech; yet much, through the help of God, did I speak ... that at my parting, many burst forth, 'Oh, when will you come again, to bring us some more news of this God?'

...

**Anum**; *a dog* ... the variety of their dialects and proper speech, within thirty or forty miles of each other, is very great, as appears in that word: **Anum**, the Cowweset dialect; **Ayim**, the Narroganset; **Arum** the Quunnicuck; **Alum**, the Neepmuck.<sup>21</sup>

Unknown to anyone at the time, members of the linguistic family in fact extended in two almost unbroken strips for 2500 kilometres, across the central and northern reaches of the continent as far as the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, from Powhatan to Shawnee to Miami to Illinois to Arapaho to Cheyenne, and from Massachusetts to Abenaki to Algonquin\* to Ojibwa to Menominee to Cree to Blackfoot. In between Powhatan and Massachusetts lay speakers of another related language, Lenape. These languages were very different from English, highly polysyllabic in their words, and with profusions of prefixes and suffixes. But they were fairly similar to each other, as a few animal names show: 'moose' is Abenaki *mos*, Miami *moswa*, Ojibwa *mōns*, Menominee *mōs*; 'seal' is Abenaki *āhkik*<sup>w</sup>, Ojibwa *āskik*, Cree *āhkik*; 'bison' is Abenaki *pāsihkó* or *wāsihko*, Menominee *pesehkiw*, Ojibwa *pišikki*, Cree *pisihkiw*; and 'bobwhite', a species of small bird (*Colinus virginianus*), is Lenape *pōhpōhkəs*, and Miami *pohposisia*. In the Massachusetts translation of

\* The French had, as it happened, already studied the Algonquin language, when exploring the Ottawa river valley in 1541.



the Bible, the word for ‘quails’ is *poohpoohqu-tteh*.<sup>22</sup> It is revealing that only in one of these four examples was the Indian word actually borrowed into English; the settlers had never seen a *pasihkó* before, but they still preferred to stick with their own linguistic world, and name it for something similar that they did know.

The settlers’ attitude to the Indians was to attempt to coexist peacefully until they needed to dispossess them to provide more land for their expanding community. There was little or no cohabitation, but hostilities followed sooner or later; and the natives of New England in the end died out far more thoroughly and rapidly than those of Mexico or Peru. Nevertheless, the English never undertook to subjugate the whole country militarily, as the Spanish did immediately in any new territory that they explored. As a result, the British authorities never felt responsible for the Indians in the way that the Spanish did; and there was far less effort to convert them. It was only an exceptional Englishman who endeavoured to reach the natives spiritually, or was concerned to try to build solidarity with them. Two such were the Cambridge graduates Roger Williams (1603?–83) and John Eliot (1604–90), who learnt their local language, and published books about it: Williams ‘A Key into the Language of America’, and Eliot ‘The Indian Grammar Begun, or an Essay to bring the Indian Language into Rules, for the help of such as desire

to learn the same, for the furtherance of the Gospel among them'.<sup>23</sup> Williams was more a political activist, expelled from Massachusetts for his views, and also acting as negotiator for the Narragansetts during hostilities; his 'Key' is full of observations on how the natural behaviour of the natives is often at least as good as that of declared Christians. Eliot was more a missionary. Since 1646 he had preached in Massachusetts, and translated the whole Bible into it by 1663.<sup>24</sup> Within thirty years there was a ring of towns round about Boston, inhabited by 'Praying Indians'. But in the next generation, when the London-based Corporation for Propagating the Gospel suggested printing a new edition, it was effectively resisted by the colonial authorities. A Puritan divine wrote back:

The Indians themselves are Divided in their Desires upon this matter. Though some of their aged men are tenacious enough of Indianisme (which is not at all to be wondred at) Others of them as earnestly wish that their people may be made English as fast as they can. The reasons they assign for it are very weighty ones; and this among the rest, That their Indian Tongue is a very penurious one (though the Words are long enough!) and the great things of our Holy Religion brought unto them in it, unavoidably arrive in Terms that are scarcely more intelligible to them than if they were entirely English. But the English tongue would presently give them a Key to all our Treasures and make them the Masters of another sort of Library than any that ever will be seen in their Barbarous Linguo...<sup>25</sup>

By then, Massachusetts speakers would already have been few: their principal tribes had been all but destroyed in 'King Philip's War' (1675–6), the last act of resistance by the Massachusetts Indians to white expansion, and the Praying Indians were particularly hard hit, having gained no reward from their loyalty to the whites but a two-year deportation to Deer Island, barren and cold, in Boston harbour.

The Virginia and Massachusetts colonies were joined in 1670 by a third, the Carolina colony, set up by eight English lords under a charter from King Charles II. It had originally had the exotic purpose to subsist on silk farming, but eventually reconciled itself to cultivation of rice and indigo.

### *Manifest destiny*

Texas is now ours. Already, before these words are written, her Convention has undoubtedly ratified the acceptance, by her Congress, of our



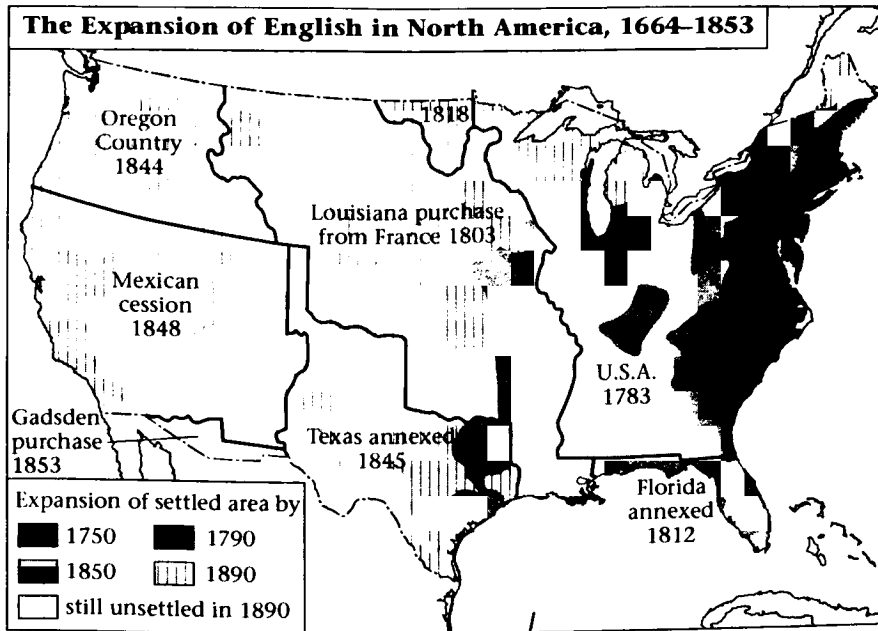
proffered invitation into the Union; ... other nations have undertaken to intrude themselves into it, between us and the proper parties to the case, in a spirit of hostile interference against us, for the avowed object of thwarting our policy and hampering our power, limiting our greatness and checking the fulfillment of our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions ... It is wholly untrue, and unjust to ourselves, the pretence that the Annexation has been a measure of spoliation, unrighteous and unrighteous—military conquest under forms of peace and law—territorial aggrandizement at the expense of justice, and justice due by a double sanctity to the weak. This view of the question is wholly unfounded ...

John L. Sullivan, *United States Magazine and Democratic Review*,  
vol. 17, July/August 1845

So the English settlers established themselves in farming communities on the eastern coast of North America. The next challenge came less from the indigenous peoples than from fellow Europeans. In the seventeenth century, the English did not have the eastern seaboard to themselves, but had to share it with colonists from France to the north, and Spain in Florida to the south (see map on p. 413). Even the centre was not uncontested, since there were Dutch and even Swedish territories intervening between Britain's Massachusetts and Virginia plantations. In all these cases, the field was cleared by wars in the mother country's strategic interests. The Dutch were expelled fairly briskly from Nieuw Nederland (Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Delaware and the southern half of New York State\*) in 1664, and the French, after a century of wars, from Nouvelle-France (eastern Canada), and Louisiane east of the Mississippi, in 1763. Britain also briefly acquired title to Florida from Spain, in exchange for Havana, which it had captured in 1762; it lost it again after the war of 1812. These were the proceeds of global struggles between the European powers, but nonetheless they opened the territories up to settlement by speakers of English.

The next major event was the war from 1775 to 1783 in which the English-speaking colonies made themselves independent of their home government in London, the 'American Revolution' which created the USA. This was highly significant politically, in that it formed an autonomous source of expansion for the English colonies in the continent; henceforth the chief

\* Swedish presence on the Atlantic seaboard was of fairly short duration (1638–55); their settlement in Delaware had been summarily evicted by the Dutch.



English-speaking power in North America was a state 'with a built-in empire',<sup>26</sup> and, as it transpired, a western frontier that constantly receded until it reached the Pacific coastline. The federal form of government that was devised in 1777 turned out to be well suited to this new empire with dynamic borders, as new acquisitions progressed from territorial status to statehood. But it also had immediate linguistic effects outside the USA. Many who could not accept the new dispensation decamped northward to Canada, and so created a significant English-speaking community in Ontario. In the following century, this was to attract one of the main streams of immigration into North America, thereby boosting its English-speaking population quite independently of the USA.

By 1783, less than two centuries after the first English colony at Roanoke, English was the official language of every settlement in the east of North America. At that point, three-quarters of what is now the continental USA ('the lower 48') was still under the nominal control of foreign powers, France, Spain and—north-west in the Oregon territory—Great Britain. But in the lapse of two generations, by 1853, the whole area was taken by the USA.\* Furthermore, by 1890 settlers had set up cities and farms in every part of the

\* In 1867, Alaska too was acquired, by purchase from Russia.

area. North of the Rio Grande and Gila rivers there was nowhere left for a significant, independent, language community to flourish.

It had all happened so easily, in just a few major constitutional gulps. President Thomas Jefferson took advantage of the brief supremacy of Napoleon in France to purchase the remaining extent of the French Americas, *la Louisiane*, in 1803; this alone doubled the area of the USA. The next two presidents, James Madison and James Monroe, annexed Florida from Spain, ratifying the deed in 1821; it turned out to be harder to detach Seminole Indians than the Spanish, and the wars with them, begun in 1817, lasted until 1842. Most of the rest of the country was taken during the administration of a single president, James Knox Polk. In 1845 he accepted the accession of Texas, which had detached itself from Mexico—itsself newly independent of Spain. In 1846 he split the difference with Britain to end a long wrangle over ownership of the Oregon country, and so created the present western border between the USA and Canada at the 49th parallel. The annexation of Texas, and imposition of war reparations, led to war with Mexico: the USA promptly won it, taking Mexico City in the process, but in 1848 declared itself content to absorb California and the rest of the west.<sup>27</sup> It might have held out for the whole of the rest of Mexico, but eventually decided it was too heavily populated with foreigners. As Senator John J. Calhoun opined—in amazing defiance of two centuries of American history: ‘To incorporate Mexico, would be the very first instance of... incorporating an Indian race; for more than half of the Mexicans are Indians, and the other is composed chiefly of mixed tribes. I protest against such a union as that! Ours... is the Government of a white race.’<sup>28</sup>

All the lands that had been gained in this rapid onset had of course long been populated, though hardly at all by the European powers from whom they were acquired. The people who had been there—some two hundred separate language communities in English-language America, and over fifty in California alone—found that contact with the settlers followed a fairly predictable course. In the first instance, before they even appeared, mysterious and deadly diseases would beset the tribe. Then, when the white man came to meet them in person, there would be an attempt at conciliation, which might lead to a treaty as between independent nations, the United States (or His Majesty’s) Government and the tribe, which would designate boundaries, and mutual obligations. There might be as much as a generation of peaceful coexistence; but later, as more and more white people arrived, and began to encroach on tribal land, the tribes would find that the white men’s willingness to enforce the agreement against their own people was highly limited; the tribes would find their territories violated, and their livelihoods destroyed.

This might mean war, but ultimately the tribes would always lose it. There were just too many whites, and they were far better armed. All too often, the final stage was a unilateral action by the white men to confine or deport the tribes to a reservation, which might be thousands of miles away. This was the English way with the natives of America, and it was repeated over and over again.

It was essentially an exercise in distancing and exclusion. Although US law recognised the tribes as distinct nations, there was no plan to accommodate them or to integrate them as such within the constitution of the republic. Rather, if there was a plan, it was for their members, individually or as families, to become citizens and householders of the republic. Thomas L. McKenney, in charge of Indian affairs from 1816, claimed: 'We want to make citizens out of them'; and part of the process lay in changing their language to English, 'the lever by which they are to elevate themselves into intellectual and moral distinction'.<sup>29</sup> On 3 March 1819 the US Congress passed an act to give education to provide 'against further decline and final extinction of the Indian tribes ... to instruct them in the mode of agriculture suited to their situation, and for teaching their children in reading, writing and arithmetic'. Expenditure increased from \$10,000 in 1819 to \$214,000 in 1842, when there were thirty-seven schools and eighty-five teachers. Rule 41 of the Reservation Boarding Schools (1881) read: 'All instruction must be in the English language. Pupils must be compelled to speak with each other in English, and should be properly rebuked or punished for persistent violation of this rule. Every effort should be made to encourage them to abandon their tribal language.'<sup>30</sup>

The official intent to eliminate the ancestral peoples of North America as separate entities has not, ultimately, been fulfilled. Indeed, the population pendulum is at last swinging back. In 1999 the indigenous population of the USA (American Indian, Eskimo and Aleut) was estimated as 2.4 million, up from 1.4 million in 1980. As a percentage of the total population, this represents a recovery from 0.6 per cent to just under 1 per cent.<sup>31</sup> But viewed as a means for spreading English, the official policies must be seen as having been effective, and far harder to reverse than a sheer loss of numbers. By now, passive knowledge of English is almost universal. Furthermore, census figures show that by 1990 fewer than a quarter of American Indians were speaking any language but English at home. Even where native language use was holding up best, on the Navajo reservation in the south-west, the number of those among the school-age population speaking only English went up, in this same period of growing Indian numbers, from 11.8 per cent in 1980 to 28.4 per cent in 1990.<sup>32</sup> Now it is reported that fewer than half of Navajo children still

speak the language.<sup>33</sup> In the present situation, the prospect for long-term survival of any of North America's own languages, even in coexistence with English, seems very bleak.

### *Winning ways*

Ask these Pilgrims what they can expect when they git to Kentuckey the Answer is Land. have you any. No, but I expect I can git it. have you anything to pay for land, No. Did you Ever see the Country. No but Every Body says its good land...

Moses Austin, 1796<sup>34</sup>

'Land is the only thing in the world that amounts to anything,' he shouted, his thick, short arms making wide gestures of indignation, 'for 'tis the only thing in this world that lasts, and don't you be forgetting it! 'Tis the only thing worth working for, worth fighting for—worth dying for.'

'Oh, Pa,' she said disgustedly, 'you talk like an Irishman!'

Margaret Mitchell, *Gone with the Wind*, 1936

At this point, with English having completed its spread across North America, it is worth pausing a moment to contemplate this awesome development. By 1890, English had become the presumed common language over 9,303,000 square kilometres of territory, thirty times the area of the British Isles. It was far more than a convenient lingua franca or trade jargon, since for most speakers it was their first language; and for the rest, it was rapidly coming to replace any other language they knew, whether in indigenous tribes or among recently arrived parties of immigrants. Within a single century, a linguistic monoculture had grown to overwhelm a sparsely scattered cornucopia of over two hundred different languages. The only expansion comparable to this in its suddenness and its radical penetration is the Muslims' spread of Arabic across the Middle East and North Africa. Others that come to mind—the spread of Greek across the Persian empire by Alexander, or that of French across north and central Africa in the nineteenth century—were as sudden, but far less penetrating; and the deep-set and permanent advance of Latin through western Europe, or of Chinese across the plains and mountains of eastern Asia, took many centuries to bring about. How was this first explosion of the English speech community possible?

In order to give a satisfactory answer, the question is best broken into two. How could a single European language take over the whole of North Amer-

ica? And why of all the contenders was it English which expanded, and not other European languages that were already in place?

The first English colonists' own motives for coming to America were largely the product of delusion. Backers of early voyages of discovery and settlement were courted with prospects of a North-West Passage to enable trade with China and India, of landed estates, and of secure bases to derive wealth from fishing and piracy. The actual returns on capital invested, which came from the fur trade, and from cultivation of crops such as tobacco and indigo, were not foreseen. But from the language point of view, the important thing is not capital, but labour. And after the colonies had become established, there were yet other reasons for people to go out to live there. Most often they were economically desperate, and went under contracts of indentured labour, serving out terms of four or five years before they were free to settle. Others came out to found a new society on ideal principles: such were the famed Pilgrim separatists who came to Massachusetts in 1620, and were followed by so many Puritans in the decades that followed, when the home country was racked by civil war, Commonwealth and Restoration. But what many found, when they arrived, was a string of English settlements where good arable land was available, and as yet largely unfarmed. Crops, when planted, flourished, and there were good markets for the harvests. Gradually, the colonies acquired a reputation for plenty, and emigration began to seem ever more attractive to those facing an uncertain future in Britain. They embarked for the west, often bringing wives and children with them. Governments were never oppressive in the colonies; but after the war for independence which prevailed in 1783, the new beacon of political liberty could be added to the attractions of ready wealth on offer.

It is this introduction of wide-scale agriculture, from hundreds of thousands of new farms, which accounts for the spread of the white settlers at the expense of the natives. It gave them the wherewithal to raise large families, far bigger than what was needed to replace their strength in the next generation: instead, the surplus would head off farther west. The population of New England quadrupled in the two generations between 1650 and 1700. And so it continued, unrelenting for more than three centuries from 1600: startling fertility coupled with an unceasing flow of new recruits from Europe.

For choice of language, it turned out to be crucial that the immigration for the first half of this period had been predominantly from the British Isles. Some 220,000 had immigrated during the seventeenth century, and perhaps twice as many in the eighteenth. Small numbers, compared with the 40 million who would come in the next two centuries. But the first immigrants' language influence was decisive: the vast majority of them had come from

Britain and Ireland, and spoke English. Not exclusively so: at the beginning of the eighteenth century, already perhaps 8 per cent of the population were of German origin. Nevertheless, in 1794 German-speaking farmers in Augusta County, Virginia, were dismissed when they asked the US House of Representatives for a German translation of the laws. The Speaker of the House at the time, F. A. C. Mühlenberg, happened to be a German himself, but still refused to support the request.\*

Since 1820, English speakers have in fact been a minority among immigrants, at 43 per cent.† But although immigrants have here and there established communities where many can understand a given foreign language, the USA as a country—perhaps taking its lead from the traditional British stance—has remained resolutely monolingual in English. Despite the vast opportunity to found new towns and cities right up until the end of the nineteenth century as the settlers moved west, English was everywhere accepted as the public language in these new communities as they arose.

Why, then, was it predominantly from Britain that North America was colonised in those first two centuries? Britain, after all, had hardly been the first to establish a foothold on the eastern American shores: Quebec was founded as the capital of Nouvelle-France in 1608 almost simultaneously with Jamestown in Virginia; and Nieuw Nederland had been begun at Fort Nassau up the Hudson river in 1617, three years before the Pilgrims settled in Massachusetts. For seventeen years, 1638–55, even the Swedes had maintained a settlement, *Ny Sverige*, at Delaware Bay, in the area claimed by the Dutch.

What distinguished the British was their desire to settle. From the very beginning, they looked for individual holdings of land, on which they could make a living, and bring up a family. However far they may have travelled, they aspired to do this on much the same terms, and with the same religious beliefs, that they had accepted in their original homes. The resulting large

\* This has been transmuted into the legend that at one point German was almost to be declared the official language of the USA.

German remained the second-largest language of immigrants (at 25 per cent) during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. There was a surge of German-speaking immigrants in the early nineteenth century, and a tendency early on for them to congregate in Pennsylvania. It peaked in the 1870s, when 600,000, among a state population of 4 million, are said to have had German ('Pennsylvania Dutch') as their everyday language, with another 150,000 outside the state. The popular use of German in public was very severely damaged by the First World War. It survives today only in small sectarian communities such as the Mennonites and Amish (Adams 1990: ch. 7).

† This is made up of 14 per cent from the UK, 13 per cent from Ireland, 12 per cent from Canada, 4 per cent from the Philippines and 1 per cent from Jamaica. After German with 25 per cent, the next languages are Russian (10 per cent), Hungarian (4 per cent) and Chinese (3 per cent) (US Dept of Justice, 1998 Statistical Yearbook, quoted in Wright 2000: 291).

families would then grow up to repeat the cycle. It was the drive and then the proven ability to do this which meant that, after the first couple of generations, when competition arose with other European powers, the British were always present in larger numbers; this translated into winning armies, but it also meant that they soon occupied any territorial gains that they made.

The crunch came with the Dutch after fifty years. In that time, the Dutch West India Company (see Chapter 11, 'Dutch interlopers', p. 395) had gone on from a culture of trading posts for beaver furs, through a supporting infrastructure of farms (*bouwerijen*),\* to offering wealthy businessmen quasi-feudal tenancies called *patroonships*, a system designed to ensure the delivery of colonists in packages of fifty. It was only when this preferential treatment for the wealthy was shelved, and the company began to offer mechanics and farmers free passage for themselves and their families in 1656, with as much land as they were able to cultivate, that settlement took off, from an estimated two thousand in 1648 to ten thousand in 1660. But it was too late. Settlers were slow to follow the company's urgings to fortify their holdings, and the British neighbours still outnumbered the Dutch four to one.<sup>35</sup> In 1664, when Colonel Nicolls arrived with four men-of-war, as one operation in the then global Anglo-Dutch war, Nieuw Nederland surrendered without a fight. It changed hands once more nine years later, but in 1674 was finally awarded to Britain. In the strictly business negotiations that ended the wars, a North American colony famous chiefly for its beaver pelts counted for less than the sugar cane of Suriname, and the nutmeg of Rûn Island in the East Indies.

The French connection with North America was a decidedly harder nut to crack. French policy had begun quite differently from British, with a strong lead from the king and his court in establishing settlements, yet a decidedly laissez-faire approach to life once there, as long as the furs continued to flow back to France. The result was a marked variance in social profile, with young single males going out alone to Nouvelle-France to become *coureurs de bois*, wild frontiersmen, and settling down—if they ever did—*à la façon du pays*, to found bilingual ménages with local women, producing *métis* children who would hardly consider themselves French at all, and might well not speak the language. This approach made them much more popular with the American Indians, who for the most part sided with them in wars with the Dutch and British. But this turned out not to be the support they needed. The economic focus on the proceeds of hunting—furs—did not make for widespread settle-

\* New York's 'Bowery' perpetuates the name of the farm of Pieter Stuyvesant, the last Dutch governor.



ment or domestication of the land, and the reliance on local brides—thereby of course denying issue to as many indigenous men—meant that their population did not increase. The French government attempted to intervene in the process in the 1670s by providing a supply of *filles à marier*, with some success (see Chapter 11, 'La francophonie', p. 414). But even this could not compete with the natural growth of the land-hungry British.

In the event it was the terms of peace after almost a century of global war, the Treaty of Paris in 1763, which were to end direct French involvement in America. But if North America alone had been the battlefield and the prize, it had long been clear who would prevail. There were over twenty Britons for every Frenchman in the continent at the time.\* And if proof were needed of the importance of men on the ground, it was provided by the English rebels of the Thirteen Colonies twenty years later, who defeated the British army as the French never could. As a final insult, the infusion of British loyalists into Canada which the war caused, together with subsequent immigration that excluded France, meant that British subjects, and English speakers, quite directly minoritised the French in what had been their own colony.

The final serious obstacle to English-speaking dominance of North America was provided by the first entrant to the colonial competition, the empire of Spain. Although Spain and England had been at royal loggerheads during the sixteenth century, and English pirates had pursued the quarrel unofficially in the Caribbean during the seventeenth, the British and Spanish governments had largely given each other a wide berth during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Then they had come to blows briefly and inconclusively, and exchanged control of Florida back and forth between 1763 and 1783. The real reckoning was to come between their two successor states, the United States of America and the Republic of Mexico, over Texas.

Once again it was the propensity of English immigrants to settle which led to trouble. Moses Austin, discovering deposits of lead, had acquired from Spain—in 1820, just before it granted independence to Mexico—a permit to bring three hundred American families into this territory, hitherto seen as a very barren area. By 1832 his colonies amounted to about eight thousand souls, and others had brought the Anglo population up to twenty thousand. In 1833 a coup in Mexico city installed Antonio López de Santa Anna, and reversed Mexican policy on Texas: the Anglos' response was to declare independence and—while staving off Mexican attempts to reclaim the territory—appeal to Uncle Sam. They had to wait out two unsympathetic admin-

\* Over 1.2 million Britons for 55,000 French.

istrations, but in 1845 President Polk agreed to annexation. Polk got the war he wanted, and was then able to get by force of arms what he had been denied as a purchase, namely the Pacific stretch of Mexico north of the Gila river, including California. In one mighty throw, the USA's bounds had been extended 'from sea to shining sea'. Then a new surge of Anglo-Saxon mass settlement sealed the acquisition, though the motive this time was one that the Spanish could very much appreciate: the settlers this time were not farmers but Forty-Niners, prospectors on the track of gold.

The fact that such a vast area—essentially what is now the whole American West—could change hands so lightly demonstrates how superficial the Spanish presence had been in the three centuries of their control. As the French had reached a non-intrusive accommodation with the natives through the fur trade in Canada and Louisiane, so the Spanish, at last planting a string of Catholic missions along the coast from 1769 to 1823, had established only the lightest contact with the Californian subjects of *Su Majestad el Rey*. Nevertheless, agriculture and stock ranches, with a significant export trade in hide, horns and tallow, had briefly flourished under the auspices of the *padres*. In the very last years, after Mexican independence in 1821, there had been a movement for more radical settlement, and from 1834 a flurry of land grants were made to Mexicans who came to be known as *los Californios*, non-clerical settlers who quickly achieved a brutal reputation. But politically, the transition to Anglo control was almost instant.

Linguistically, the situation has turned out to be far more ambivalent. It seems that those *padres* and even *Californios* had quite an influence. Today, one and a half centuries after the appropriation of Florida, Texas and northern Mexico, 20 million US citizens, 7.3 per cent of the population, still consider Spanish to be, not their second, but their *first* language.<sup>36</sup> Since almost all of these will live in one of the nine states\* that used to be, at least in part, Spanish territory (total population 83 million), the language situation there is actually one where one person in four is still happiest to speak Spanish. The incoming Anglo settlers, resident for five or six generations, have clearly established English as dominant: but the Spanish-language community is not dying out. Indeed, it is still growing.

\* Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida, Nevada, New Mexico, Texas, Utah, Wyoming.