

Editorial

“Thank you for your country”

It is a great honour to be invited to write a Foreword for the twentieth-anniversary edition of the journal American, British and Canadian Studies. The invitation deepens the cross-European link of more than twenty years' standing between the universities of Aberystwyth in Wales, UK, and Lucian Blaga in Sibiu, Romania. This link between two European universities feels more important than ever at a time when Britain is deeply divided over its future in Europe. Indeed, for the past three years, following the EU Referendum of 2016, Britain has been drifting closer and closer to the disaster of “leaving” Europe. I have been thinking, during the last few days, of the ending of Joseph Conrad’s tale “The Secret Sharer.” The narrator – the captain of an unnamed ship – is taking his vessel close inshore, so that his fugitive can slip overboard and escape. The manoeuvre is fraught with danger, and the tension mounts as they drift inexorably towards the point of no-return. As they approach the darkness of the looming cliff, the captain watches “the great shadow gliding closer, towering higher, without a light, without a sound.” Soon they are hovering in the very jaws of hell, and “such a hush had fallen on the ship that she might have been a bark of the dead floating in slowly under the very gate of Erebus.” Will there be anyone aboard, in our hour of need, with the authority needed to issue the command “Shift the helm,” before it is too late? As I write this, the answer is unknowable, but the shadow continues to darken.

Meanwhile, my own most recent Channel-crossing took place a fortnight ago. The destination was a smallish town in Belgium which was commemorating its liberation, seventy-five years before, by British and Commonwealth troops. Among them was my father’s twin-brother, Uncle

Gerard, who was serving in the Army as Catholic Chaplain to a Scots battalion. As the battalion attempted a canal-crossing under fire, he and two stretcher-bearers were hit by shrapnel at their forward casualty station beside the canal. The organisers of the memorial event said that we must keep remembering, and keep thanking them all. In the military cemetery we were handed a little plywood cross with a poppy attached and it was suggested that we might want to write a message on it to our family member. We wrote "Thank you, Uncle Gerard", and placed it on his grave. The words I have used as my title were said to my wife by a lady who was in tears after listening to the tributes and testimonies delivered on the spot. She embraced Marianne and said those words – "Thank you for your country." The European Union, in its evolving guises over the years, has helped to keep our Continent largely at peace since those days, and the recent growth of prejudices and divisions in many of our countries must be feared and guarded against.

In November 2009 I arrived at Sibiu airport for the second time, to attend the conference celebrating "40 Years of English at Lucian Blaga." The young man inspecting passports noticed that "Liverpool" is my place of birth. He looked up and asked "Liverpool supporter?" I said "Yes". "Champions League?" he queried. The great European football competition that year was still at its early stages, but Liverpool's chances of making progress were already hopeless. I shook my head sadly and answered "No." He slid the passport back towards me through the grill and said "You'll Never Walk Alone." Hearing those words from the team's emotional anthem made my arrival feel like a homecoming. In fact, whenever I have been in Romania, and especially in your own beautiful part of it, I have felt that your country is now also partly mine. So I too want to say what my title says – "Thank you for your country."

I have taken of late to reading books about old Europe – currently Jan Morris's Trieste and the Meaning of Nowhere (Faber 2001), about a place which is, in an inspiring way, "ethnically ambivalent, historically confused." I have also been enjoying, from the nineteenth-century,

Ruskin (in Praeterita) and Stevenson (in Travels with a Donkey) celebrating the light, ice, inns, and valleys, of Europe, and, as always, the travel books of Henry James, with their descriptions of the statues, hotels, ghosts, theatres, myths and churches of his beloved Old World. These are the consolations of literature, which we all share. And that sharing is greatly facilitated and perpetuated by the journal American, British and Canadian Studies which Ana-Karina and her colleagues are now ably guiding into its next twenty years of international scholarship, culture, and, of course, friendship.

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