
RACE

AND MANIFEST DESTINY

The Origins of American
Racial Anglo-Saxonism

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Introduction

By 1850 American expansion was viewed in the United States less as a victory for the principles of free democratic republicanism than as evidence of the innate superiority of the American Anglo-Saxon branch of the Caucasian race. In the middle of the nineteenth century a sense of racial destiny permeated discussions of American progress and of future American world destiny. Many think of rampant doctrines of Caucasian, Aryan, or Anglo-Saxon destiny as typical of the late years of the nineteenth century, but they flourished in the United States in the era of the Mexican War.

The contrast in expansionist rhetoric between 1800 and 1850 is striking. The debates and speeches of the early nineteenth century reveal a pervasive sense of the future destiny of the United States, but they do not have the jarring note of rampant racialism that permeates the debates of mid-century.¹ By 1850 the em-

phasis was on the American Anglo-Saxons as a separate, innately superior people who were destined to bring good government, commercial prosperity, and Christianity to the American continents and to the world. This was a superior race, and inferior races were doomed to subordinate status or extinction. This new racial arrogance did not pass unnoticed at the time. A minority frequently asked why the American Anglo-Saxons could so easily read God's intentions for mankind, and some, unkindly but accurately, pointed out that there was no "Anglo-Saxon race"; England clearly contained a mixture of peoples, and the white population of the United States was even less homogenous. The religious orthodox had the additional problem of reconciling the idea of a superior separate race with the biblical notion of one human species descended in just a few thousand years from Adam and Eve through Noah. But the logical inconsistencies and contradictions were ignored. Even the critics of the new assumptions of peculiar racial destiny acknowledged that the idea had caught the political and popular imagination, and even the opponents of a vigorously expansionist foreign policy cast their arguments in racial terms.

The origins of this American rejection of other peoples have to be sought both in Europe and the United States. In one respect the new assumptions stemmed logically from a whole trend toward racist thinking in Western thought in the first half of the nineteenth century. The ideas of superior and inferior races that permeated American thinking about continental and world mission also often permeated the thinking of the English and of western Europeans in general by the mid-nineteenth century. When Gobineau published his work on the inequality of the human races in 1854, he was summarizing and amplifying more than half a century of ideas on race rather than inaugurating a new era. It is impossible to understand why the United States viewed its international role racially by 1850 without understanding why the European nations had also come to think of themselves in racial as well as political terms.

But the United States had a history that gave a particularly fervent and unique quality to the arguments of special racial destiny and accentuated the rate at which a racial explanation of

world power was accepted. Since the seventeenth century the idea of the Americans as a "chosen people" had permeated first Puritan and then American thought. It is not uncommon for a people to think of themselves as chosen, but it is much rarer for a people to be given apparent abundant empirical proof of God's choice. God's intentions were first revealed in the survival and prosperity of the tiny colonies, elaborated by the miracle of a successful revolution against the might of Great Britain, and confirmed by a growth that amazed the world in the sixty years after that conflict. When religious fervor assumed a less central role in America, it was succeeded by the political fervor of a successful revolution.

If the continent had been empty and colonized only by white Europeans, the remarkable success of the United States would have still made it a rich breeding ground for the new racial thought of the nineteenth century; but it was neither empty nor exclusively white. In the first half of the nineteenth century many in the United States were anxious to justify the enslavement of the blacks and the expulsion and possible extermination of the Indians. The American intellectual community did not merely absorb European ideas, it also fed European racial appetites with scientific theories stemming from the supposed knowledge and observation of blacks and Indians. In this era the popular periodicals, the press, and many American politicians eagerly sought scientific proof for racial distinctions and for the prevailing American and world order; the intellectual community provided the evidence they needed.

The success of the Puritan settlement, the triumph of republicanism in the Revolution, the extensive material prosperity, the rapid territorial growth, and the presence of blacks and Indians all gave a special quality to the manner in which the United States received and developed the racial thought of Western Europe. Yet American racial thought was also peculiarly English. As English colonials, the new Americans fell heir to a long Anglo-Saxon-Teutonic tradition. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, long before a specifically racist Anglo-Saxon concept emerged, the Americans shared with the English a belief in the political and individual freedoms of the Anglo-Saxon per-

iod. Americans of the Revolutionary generation believed they were helping to recreate freedoms enjoyed in England more than seven hundred years before.

The term "Anglo-Saxon" has had a long history of misuse. In reality there was never a specific Anglo-Saxon people in England. A number of tribes from northern Germany began to settle in England in large numbers in the fifth century; they were not an homogenous group of "Anglo-Saxons," and they did not completely replace the Celtic tribes already living in England. Later the Viking invasions resulted in the settlement of other groups from northern Europe, and the Normans were added to the mix by the Conquest. When in the nineteenth century the English began writing "Anglo-Saxon" in a racial sense, they used it to describe the people living within the bounds of England, but, at times, they also used it to describe a vague brotherhood of English-speaking peoples throughout the British Isles and the world.

In the United States in the nineteenth century the term "Anglo-Saxon" became even less precise. It was often used by the 1840s to describe the white people of the United States in contrast to blacks, Indians, Mexicans, Spaniards, or Asiatics, although it was frequently acknowledged that the United States already contained a variety of European strains. Yet even those who liked to talk of a distinct "American" race, composed of the best Caucasian strains, drew heavily on the arguments developed to elevate the Anglo-Saxons. It was repeatedly emphasized that it was the descendants of Anglo-Saxons who had successfully settled the eastern seaboard and established free government by means of a Revolution. An Irishman might be described as a lazy, ragged, dirty Celt when he landed in New York, but if his children settled in California they might well be praised as part of the vanguard of the energetic Anglo-Saxon people poised for the plunge into Asia.

The process by which the long-held beliefs in the superiority of early Anglo-Saxon political institutions became a belief in the innate superiority of the Anglo-Saxon branch of the Caucasian race was directly linked to the new scientific interest in racial classification. But in a more general sense it involved the whole

surging Romantic interest in uniqueness, in language, and in national and racial origins. Both directly from Germany and by transmission through England, the Americans were inspired to link their Anglo-Saxon past to its more distant Teutonic or Aryan roots. Even in colonial America the ancient idea of the westward movement of civilization had brought dreams of a great new empire on the North American continent, but as German philologists linked language to race and wrote of tribes spreading westward from central Asia following the path of the sun, the Americans were able to see new meaning in their drive to the Pacific and Asia. They could and did conceive of themselves as the most vital and energetic of those Aryan peoples who had spilled westward, "revitalized" the Roman Empire, spread throughout Europe to England, and crossed the Atlantic in their relentless westward drive. Americans had long believed they were a chosen people, but by the mid-nineteenth century they also believed that they were a chosen people with an impeccable ancestry.

By 1850 a clear pattern was emerging. From their own successful past as Puritan colonists, Revolutionary patriots, conquerors of a wilderness, and creators of an immense material prosperity, the Americans had evidence plain before them that they were a chosen people; from the English they had learned that the Anglo-Saxons had always been peculiarly gifted in the arts of government; from the scientists and ethnologists they were learning that they were of a distinct Caucasian race, innately endowed with abilities that placed them above other races; from the philologists, often through literary sources, they were learning that they were the descendants of those Aryans who followed the sun to carry civilization to the whole world.

The new ideas fell on fertile ground in the 1830s and 1840s. In a time of rapid growth and change, with its accompanying insecurities and dislocations, many Americans found comfort in the strength and status of a distinguished racial heritage. The new racial ideology could be used to force new immigrants to conform to the prevailing political, economic, and social system, and it could also be used to justify the sufferings or deaths of blacks, Indians, or Mexicans. Feelings of guilt could be as-

suaged by assumptions of historical and scientific inevitability.

In the 1840s and 1850s there were obviously specific reasons why particular Americans desired Texas, Oregon, California, Cuba, Canada, and large parts of Mexico and central America, and why many urged the commercial penetration of Asia. Agrarian and commercial desires and the search for national and personal wealth and security were at the heart of mid-nineteenth-century expansion, but the racial ideology that accompanied and permeated these drives helped determine the nature of America's specific relationships with other peoples encountered in the surge to world power. By the 1850s it was generally believed in the United States that a superior American race was destined to shape the destiny of much of the world. It was also believed that in their outward thrust Americans were encountering a variety of inferior races incapable of sharing in America's republican system and doomed to permanent subordination or extinction.

My interest in this book is in suggesting how and why by the mid-nineteenth century many Americans were less concerned with the liberation of other peoples by the spreading of republicanism than with the limitless expansion of a superior American Anglo-Saxon race. My concern is not with the history of science, of language, or of ideas in themselves, but in how the ideas of various sections of the intellectual community both reflected and influenced popular and political attitudes. My interest is in the origins of the new racial ideology and in how it affected the course of American expansion rather than in ways in which the ideology was used internally in an attempt to protect the interests of various classes and groups within American society. To me the Americans of 1850, when talking or writing of their world mission, have always made a lot less sense than the Americans of the Revolutionary generation, and I have written this book in an attempt to find out why.

I

EUROPEAN AND
COLONIAL ORIGINS

Liberty and the Anglo-Saxons

Has not every restitution of the antient Saxon laws had happy effects? Is it not better now that we return at once into that happy system of our ancestors, the wisest and most perfect ever yet devised by the wit of man, as it stood before the 8th century?

Thomas Jefferson, August 13, 1776

Although the concept of a distinct, superior Anglo-Saxon race, with innate endowments enabling it to achieve a perfection of governmental institutions and world dominance, was a product of the first half of the nineteenth century, the roots of these ideas stretch back at least to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Those Englishmen who settled in America at the beginning of the seventeenth century brought as part of their historical and religious heritage a clearly delineated religious myth of a pure English Anglo-Saxon church, and in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries they shared with their fellow Englishmen an elaborately developed secular myth of the free nature of Anglo-Saxon political institutions. By the time of the American Revolution Americans were convinced that Anglo-Saxon England before the Norman Conquest had enjoyed freedoms unknown since that date. The emphasis was on institutions rather

than race, but since the sixteenth century, both on the European continent and in England, the Anglo-Saxons had also been firmly linked to the Germanic tribes described by Tacitus.

The first enthusiastic English interest in Anglo-Saxon England was a product of the English Reformation. As early as the 1530s the Saxon church was studied to provide propaganda to justify Henry VIII's break with Rome. The main object of the research was to show that the English church was returning to the purer practices of the period before 1066. Supposed Anglo-Saxon precedents were used to support the argument that England had cleansed the Roman Catholic Church of the abuses introduced through the centuries by papal power.¹

The key figure in establishing a historical base for the new Anglican church that emerged under Elizabeth was Archbishop Matthew Parker. To justify the Elizabethan church settlement, Parker became a major patron of Anglo-Saxon scholarship, collecting manuscripts, encouraging the study of the Anglo-Saxon language, and publishing texts. Depending heavily on the help of his secretary, John Joscelyn, Parker effectively initiated the serious study of pre-Norman England.² Although the object of Parker's group was to establish the antiquity of the customs of the new English church, his efforts also stimulated an interest and pride in general English history in the Anglo-Saxon period. John Foxe, in his *Acts and Monuments* (1563), emphasized the early development of English church practices, but he also stressed the uniqueness of the English and their nature as "a chosen people," with a church lineage stretching back to Joseph of Arimathea and his supposed visit to England, and with John Wyclif as the true originator of the Reformation.³ The religious propagandists of the late sixteenth century defended a church that was peculiarly English in its inspiration. Whatever the errors of the rest of Europe, it was believed that the English had cleansed of corruption a church whose roots stretched back to shortly after the time of Christ.

The interest in Anglo-Saxon religious sources, which helped to justify the break with Rome, also eventually helped overturn the Arthurian legends, which had dominated medieval accounts of the origins of the English people. Rather than the traditional

story of the settlement of England by Brutus, his Trojans, and Britons, which had been given its greatest elaboration by Geoffrey of Monmouth, emphasis now shifted to the Germanic tribes as colonizers of Anglo-Saxon England.⁴ In emphasizing the Germanic origins of the English, antiquarians of the early seventeenth century linked the English arguments to the general Germanic movement in Europe and ultimately to Tacitus.

Lauding the peculiar qualities of the Germanic people had been common on the Continent since the early years of the Reformation; German reformers drew an analogy between the earlier "Germanic" or "Gothic" destruction of the universal Roman Empire and the new destruction of the universal Roman Church.⁵ Theories were advanced which foreshadowed the ultra-Teutonism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In 1580 Goropius Becamus, a Flemish physician, argued that German was the first of all languages and had been spoken in the Garden of Eden by Adam. This argument was too outlandish even for most Teutons, but Goropius's emphasis on the great antiquity and excellence of the German language gained many followers in England as well as on the Continent. Throughout the seventeenth century Continental arguments in praise of the Germanic heritage were cited in English works on the origins and institutions of the Anglo-Saxons.⁶

The linking of superior institutions to a particular people was given a major impetus in England by the writings of Richard Verstegen and William Camden. In 1605 Verstegen dedicated his *Restitution of Decayed Intelligence* to James I, "descended of the chiefest blood royall of our ancient English-Saxon Kings." Verstegen wrote with passion of England's Germanic and Anglo-Saxon past, the Germanic roots of the English language, and, surprisingly for this early date, the common racial origin of the Saxons, Danes, and Normans. Using Tacitus as his source, he described the courage and high principles of the Germanic tribes, and he emphasized that the English, like the Germans, were an unmixed race; the great invasions of England by Danes and Normans merely reunited old brethren.⁷ Discussions of the English as a perfect blend of the great northern peoples was not common until the nineteenth century, and Verstegen foreshadowed later racial interpretations of the German and Saxon past.

William Camden did not espouse the Germanic cause with the same vigor and consistency as Verstegen, but in his *Britannia* he helped to overturn medieval accounts of the English past by his attack on the theory of descent from Brutus and his Trojans. Later, in his *Remaines concerning Britaine*, he argued that the English were descended from a great German people, and he saw God's hand in the guiding of the Angles and Saxons to England. Both Verstegen and Camden were interested in the special characteristics of the English as a people as well as in the institutions of the Anglo-Saxon period.⁸

The emphasis on the Anglo-Saxons as a vigorous branch of the sturdy Germanic tree continued as one thread in the political arguments of the seventeenth century. As yet, not all agreed that political liberty had been brought to England by the Anglo-Saxons (Sir Edward Coke traced English liberties back long before that time), but the emphasis on Anglo-Saxons as particularly able Germans now became a commonplace in writings on English history.⁹ The primary source for Germanic characteristics was Tacitus's *Germania*, which was constantly used over the following centuries to defend the idea of the Germans as a freedom-loving, noble race. "In the peoples of Germany," wrote Tacitus, "there has been given to the world a race untainted by intermarriage with other races, a peculiar people and pure, like no one but themselves." This "pure" race, he argued, had a high moral code and a profound love of freedom and individual rights; important decisions were made by the whole community. These ideas were woven into seventeenth-century discussions of Anglo-Saxon political institutions; "some have sent us to Tacitus and as far as Germany to learn our English constitution" was the comment of an English pamphleteer.¹⁰

In the first half of the seventeenth century the political and legal history of the Anglo-Saxons became a central issue in the growing rift between Parliament and the Crown. Parliamentarians found in the supposed antiquity of Parliament and of English common law a rationale for opposition to royal pretensions. The scholarly basis for the opposition to the king was often provided by the research of men associated with the Society of Antiquaries. Deeply involved in the basic work of the

society were Sir Robert Cotton, John Selden, and Sir Henry Spelman: Cotton blamed the loss of the legal privileges of the Saxon period on the Norman Conquest; Selden praised Anglo-Saxon law in contrast to the later development of royal absolutism; and Spelman emphasized the oppression of post-Conquest feudal tenures and became an ardent advocate of the Anglo-Saxon language.¹¹

As royal pretensions increased in the first decades of the seventeenth century, the parliamentarians defended English rights as rooted in immemorial law and custom. Anglo-Saxon history was corrupted to provide a defense for parliamentary arguments. Two famous documents—the *Modus Tenendi Parliamentum* and the *Mirror of Justices*—whose true origins were late medieval were used to bolster the claims that King Alfred had instituted annual sessions of Parliament and universal male suffrage, and that the House of Lords had been a part of the English Constitution since the time of Edward the Confessor.¹²

The most famous of the parliamentarians who used and developed a historical myth to resist the king was Sir Edward Coke. Coke stressed the antiquity of the common law, the common law courts, and the House of Commons, but he was not in the tradition of those like Verstegen who saw a Germanic origin for much that was best in England. Coke was more peculiarly English in his arguments; he traced the history of the common law of England back before the coming of the Anglo-Saxons to time immemorial.

Ultimately, sharp differences developed among those who opposed royal power. Coke believed that the common law had survived unscathed from the most distant times and should at all costs be protected; but the Levellers thought that the common law had been corrupted by post-Conquest tyranny, and that it should be swept away. The arguments of the Levellers and their successors were ultimately to be of more importance to the American colonists than those of Coke, though Coke did much to popularize the idea of the supreme abilities of the Anglo-Saxons. Like the later colonial revolutionaries, the Levellers believed that the excellent government which had existed before the Norman Conquest had to be restored by abolishing

all the abuses that had crept into English law and government since that time. But, whatever the arguments as to the state of England prior to the Anglo-Saxons and on the condition of England after the Norman Conquest, there was general agreement that the England of the Anglo-Saxons had been a country in which the citizens were protected by good laws and in which representative institutions and trial by jury flourished. The myth of a pure Anglo-Saxon church, developed in the sixteenth century, was in the seventeenth century joined by a more powerful myth of a free Anglo-Saxon government.¹³

When in England the violence and turmoil of a half century subsided in the aftermath of the Glorious Revolution of 1688, there emerged a classic "Whig" view of the past. In this view a golden age of good government had existed in England prior to the Norman Conquest. The Conquest had eroded English liberties, but had been followed by a long struggle for the restoration of good government, of which the foundation had been the Magna Carta and the capstone the seventeenth-century victories over the usurpations of the Stuarts. As a result of these victories England was a nation with a continuity of law and institutions stretching back more than a thousand years, a nation inhabited by Anglo-Saxons who had always been freedom-loving, and who had always exhibited an outstanding capacity for good government.

Not all Englishmen accepted the classic Whig view. There were anti-Whigs, like Thomas Hobbes, who saw Anglo-Saxon society in a truer light, and there were also the "Real Whigs" or "Commonwealthmen," who believed that the struggles of the seventeenth century had failed to restore to England the liberties that had existed before the Norman Conquest. The Real Whigs were often more enthusiastic about the Anglo-Saxons than those who accepted the more general Whig interpretation of the past, for they were anxious to contrast the Anglo-Saxon government with the government accepted by modern Englishmen. The Real Whigs also wrote of the Germanic peoples from whom the Anglo-Saxons had sprung. Particularly influential was Robert Molesworth's *Account of Denmark*, published in the 1690s, which praised "the northern nations" for introducing the