

Captain Basil Hall and The Forest Rose

In 1832 William Duffy and William Forrest, owners of the Arch Street Theatre in Philadelphia, asked George Handle Hill, a rising American comic actor, to prepare a part for them. Perhaps surprisingly, Hill chose an older play, one that had gained original success in 1825, called *The Forest Rose*. When *The Forest Rose* first appeared, it did modestly well. Not many people attended the premiere—indeed, Frances Hodge relates that fewer than 100 persons were present in the audience that day—but it played for a solid run, and was used as a benefits piece for Woodsworth a few times before he quit the profession entirely. By 1832, though, *The Forest Rose* was an older play. Yet Hill set it to premiere on November 24, 1832. Perhaps to everyone’s surprise, it became a hit. It was so popular that Richard Moody, a noted theatre historian, calls it the “nineteenth-century *Oklahoma*.” The play was shown time after time, and it made George Hill a star.

Why did *The Forest Rose* do so well in 1832? By all accounts, it should have been a piece for little notice. The score was old, the music was outdated, and the script was well-known. There would be no surprises for the audience. It was a known quantity. But it was a smash sensation—a box office triumph that kept going for nearly 40 years. Why was this? In this paper, I will argue that *The Forest Rose* regained such astounding success—and kept it—because it inadvertently tapped into a subject of interest in the mid-nineteenth century—English travelers. Specifically, I will argue that the play reminded audiences of their hatred for Captain Basil Hall, an English traveler who toured the country in 1828 and published a loathed travelogue in 1829.

Captain Basil Hall, a British Navy retiree and continuous world traveler, visited America from 1827-1828. He arrived in New York on April 17, 1827. He and his family traveled extensively across North America. Hall kept a journal during all of his excursions to foreign lands, and his trip to America was no different. He kept a journal and recorded his findings on America and its inhabitants. The

travelogue that came from this journal, titled *Travels in North America in 1827 & 1828*, was published soon after the Captain returned home.

Americans awaited the publication of *Travels in North America* anxiously. They believed that Captain Hall had liked their country, and they believed he would relate good things about them to the world. They were horribly wrong. *Travels in North America*, says Jane Louise Mesick, “had the effect of arousing a storm of angry feelings in the Americans,” because of its virulent report of America. It seems that the Captain had few nice things to say about America. In fact, so harsh was his critique that after 1829 Captain Hall became known as the “arch-traitor to American hospitality”¹.

Why were Americans so upset by his book? Were Americans simply too thin-skinned when dealing with criticism of their country, as was oft commented in U.S. and international presses²? Perhaps, but *Travels in North America* was filled with hateful half-truths, unpleasant sentiments, and biased opinions which went well beyond the common, repeated transatlantic critiques of the New World. Hall, for instance, voices the usual complaints about traveling, mosquitoes, bad weather, and not being able to find a decent cup of tea along his journey; but many of his critiques go deeper and seem harsher than those found in other works. For example, he is particularly unkind in describing the American character. He remarks on Americans’ sternness and severity; he implies that U.S. citizens lack morals, particularly when it comes to drinking; and he even denigrates their physical appearance and intelligence³. He is also particularly unkind when he discusses the landscape, improvements made to

¹ Mesick, *The English Traveller*, 288 and 12, respectively.

² Cameron C. Nickels well explains the “paper war” that went on between America and England, and he details how Americans were often cited as being “thin-skinned” to criticism in his work *New England Humor: From the Revolutionary War to the Civil War* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1993), 13. Trollope also recounts Americans as being thin-skinned when it came to criticism as well throughout Chapter XXXI of *Domestic Manners*.

³ See Hall, *Travels in North America* vol. 1, 10 and vol. III, 387 for examples of “severity”. See vol. III, 166 for an example of drinking. See vol. III, 259 for examples of physical appearance, and vol. II, 34-35 and 303 for “intelligence.”

the land, and American institutions⁴. In other words, within *Travels in North America*, Hall criticizes the very aspects and improvements of which contemporary Americans were proud.

Hall's imposing, snobbish attitude is particularly apparent when he speaks of the New York legislature. He summarizes his experience of the law-makers, saying: "...in truth the arguments seemed to me so shallow, and were all so ambitiously, or rather wordily, expressed that I was frequently at a loss for some minutes to think what the orators really meant, or if they meant any thing"⁵. Later he says, "The orators rambled about from topic to topic with a most wasteful contempt of time, of which I dare say the same persons would have been much more economical had they been at their ordinary occupations—that is to say, working with their hands, not with their heads"⁶. Even the most powerful men in the United States are foolish, loquacious yokels in Hall's assessment.

Americans had not forgiven Captain Basil Hall by 1832. Indeed, newspaper stories still spoke of him with disgust and derision, and satirical works referenced him biting. In 1830, for instance, Richard Biddle published a full length rebuttal of *Travels in North America*. A story of Captain Hall violating the ladies' cabin on board a steamboat also circulated in newspapers across the country in this year⁷. In 1831 *The Richmond Enquirer* carried a mock epic-poem which blasted the Captain⁸. In 1832 James Fenimore Cooper published a long article in reply to Captain Basil Hall which was reprinted in many sources⁹. Also in 1832: James Kirke Paulding published *Westward Ho!* that includes a scene in which Hall is named, caricatured, and mocked¹⁰. In 1833 and 1834 newspaper articles still referenced him as one who rewarded hospitality with abuse, who wrote without correct information, and who derided without

⁴ See Hall, *Travels in North America*, vol. I, 50-51 and vol. III, 338 for examples of how he discusses the landscape. See the description of Montpellier in vol. III, 123-124 for "improvements". American institutions are so thoroughly derided throughout the book that trying to give specific page numbers would be nearly impossible.

⁵ Hall, *Travels in North America*, vol. II, 35.

⁶ Hall, *Travels in North America*, vol. II, 51.

⁷ See *The New-York Mirror*, July 24, 1830.

⁸ See "To Captain Basil Hall, R.N., &c. &c." *The Richmond Enquirer*, March 29, 1831.

⁹ Originally in *The New Monthly Magazine*, October 1832. Reprinted in *The Eastern Argus*, January 13, 1832.

¹⁰ See the *Connecticut Mirror*, October 27, 1832.

substantial knowledge or experience¹¹. The memory of what Americans considered Hall's unjust assertions did not die quickly.

Knowing how hated Hall was in the 1830s helps to explain *The Forest Rose's* popularity. The plot of *The Forest Rose* is similar to many Yankee plays. Bellamy, an evil English traveler, hopes to take Harriet, a young American girl, with him back to the city and there ruin her. He plans on kidnapping her, but in his ignorance of America, he asks a Yankee to help him secure the girl. Jonathan Ploughboy, the Yankee of the play, says that he will help Bellamy. Agreeing to assist in a dastardly plot would have been unthinkable for a true stage Yankee¹²; Jonathan goes along with this plan because he wants to find a way to both keep the money and not follow through with his part of the kidnapping. In a subplot, Blanchford, a city dweller, is searching for Lydia, his long lost love. Blanchford and Lydia wanted to marry, but his father, an Englishman, would not hear of the match because of his prejudice against Americans. After the death of his father, however, Blanchford has come to the countryside looking for the girl. He knows she is in the area when Bellamy discovers a locket he gave to Lydia. Blanchford and Lydia are reunited, just as Bellamy plans on capturing Harriet. With the help of Sally, a shrewd young country woman, Jonathan tricks Bellamy. Bellamy is supposed to kidnap Harriet. Instead he ends up securing, kissing, and pledging his love to 'Lid Rose, an African American woman, and is thusly disgraced in front of the entire rural community.

Three coincidental similarities between Bellamy and Hall would have reminded audiences watching the play about the infamous English traveler. For instance, one of the markers that Bellamy is

¹¹ See the *Richmond Enquirer*, October 14, 1833 and the *Baltimore Patriot*, November 25, 1834 for representative examples.

¹² A stock Yankee character had formed by this point in the nineteenth century. He was a foolish character and comical, but honest and decent. I have written about how he worked in conjunction with the veteran as a vehicle of nationalism. Maura Cronin, "The Yankee and the Veteran: Vehicles of Nationalism," *Journal of American Drama and Theatre*, 13, no. 2, (Spring 2001), 51-70. The Yankee would not aid such an evildoer, under any circumstances. He was, after all, an image of the idealized (though humorous) rural American. He might think about it, and try to calculate a way to keep the money, but he would not act solely with malicious intentions.

an Englishman is his pronunciation. If one can speak of characters having catchphrases within this drama, then one must consider Bellamy's refrain of "'pon honour" as his¹³. He says this phrase nine times throughout the script. Standard British pronunciation was a large part of Bellamy's characterization. Captain Basil Hall was a staunch advocate of English as it was spoken in Britain. A newspaper report from August, 1829 records, "The Captain complains that the English language is modified in America, and that, in all his travels... he never encountered any people by whom he found it so difficult to make himself understood, as by the Americans"¹⁴. Likewise, the *Connecticut Courant* reported, "Captain Hall... with a very harmless vanity, thinks the Americans have a *very imperfect knowledge of the English language*"¹⁵. Hall's disparagement of American pronunciation was so strongly felt that when Frances Trollope published *Domestic Manners of the Americans* in 1832, the American editor refers to Hall as "All," pointedly removing the "H"¹⁶. Hall was remembered for his "snobbish" pronunciation and linguistic distinction; Bellamy too is noted in this way.

The second unintentional reminder audiences would have had was that Bellamy uses a glass to look through on stage. When he first sees Harriet, for example, the script says that he eyes her through his glass. Later in the scene, he "surveys William through his glass"¹⁷. This glass through which he views rural Americans would have reminded audiences of the camera lucida that Hall used on his journey through America¹⁸. Captain Hall made 169 sketches in North America between 1827-1828. Ferdinand Anders, who wrote the Preface for the 1965 edition of Hall's work, explains: "A selection of 40 drawings, were published at the same time as *Travels in North America* in a separate folio-volume and were

¹³ Many scholars have examined Jonathan Ploughboy's famous repeated line "I would not serve a poor negro so."

¹⁴ *The New-Hampshire Patriot and State Gazette*, September 7, 1829.

¹⁵ Original emphasis. *Connecticut Courant*, August 25, 1829.

¹⁶ Trollope, *Domestic Manners*, xxi.

¹⁷ Samuel Woodworth "The Forest Rose or American Farmers" in *Dramas From the American Theatre 1762-1909*, ed., Richard Moody, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1966), 157.

¹⁸ *The Salem Gazette*, September 29, 1829, says that Hall "views American through an opera glass, and seldom gets it to the right focus." Hall was remembered as traveling with a glass, but he was also remembered as metaphorically misusing a glass.

reprinted several times during a short period”¹⁹. These depictions of America and its inhabitants set out a biased view of the new country. Included in his sketches were depictions of slaves, backwoodsmen, Indians, and simple rural settings. Few ladies or gentlemen appeared. No cities were shown. These sketches did not further transatlantic understanding but presented an erroneous vision of America. Americans’ anger might have been reignited when seeing an Englishman looking through a device with devious intensions.

Lastly, Bellamy claims to be writing a travelogue. At the end of the play, he gives the title of his forthcoming work: “Three Months in America”²⁰. Captain Hall traveled extensively through America, but Americans did not perceive the situation this way. He was constantly criticized for writing about places in which he only spent a few days, and he was critiqued for assessing American practices and institutions without sufficient understanding of local customs. Bellamy seems to embody this same fault. In the first scene, Harriet asks William about architectural practices in New York City. Before the rural man can answer her, Bellamy steps in, saying: “Permit me to answer that question, if you please, miss; for though I have been but a short time in America, I am just from the city, and flatter myself that I know something about it”²¹. Bellamy has not been in the country for long, yet he interrupts a conversation between two Americans, offering his knowledge about an American city. Likewise, the audience finds out later (as per the title of his forthcoming travelogue), he plans on spending only three months in America. While in the country, it would seem he intends to spend his time seducing and ruining American women, not getting to know the inhabitants or bettering his understanding of their country. Bellamy’s travelogue will not contain pleasing remarks on America, nor will its representation of the country be a fair one. How could it be fair, coming from such a wicked, arrogant, and biased person? Bellamy’s threat of a

¹⁹ Hall, *Travels in North America*, xxii.

²⁰ Woodworth, *The Forest Rose*, 173.

²¹ Woodworth, *The Forest Rose*, 157.

forthcoming travelogue and his attitude towards Americans surely would have reminded audience members of Captain Basil Hall and *Travels in North America*.

Because of the links between Woodworth's character (Bellamy) and the hated English traveler (Hall), Americans might have enjoyed the treatment Bellamy receives within the play, for the native characters treat him as a scoundrel even before he shows himself to be one. In the first scene, for example, after Bellamy tells Harriet about the city, she asks him: "You spoke of *donkies*, sir; does that mean the same thing as *dandies*"²²? To this, he replies, [referring to her] "Humph! Not quite so simple as I imagined," and he deflects the question to William, her rural lover²³. His tactic backfires. William replies, "The two words, I believe, are derived from the same *root*. The real genuine dandy, however, is an *imported* animal; and the breed having been crossed in this country, the full-blooded bucks command but a low price in the market at the present time"²⁴. Even in this first scene, well before the audience hears of Bellamy's evil intentions, one sees Americans belittle and denigrate an English visitor.

William's abuse of Bellamy continues. Later in the scene he mocks the English traveler again. He says, "That for the English dandy [snapping his fingers] with his squinter. Ah! 'pon honour [imitating]"²⁵. William hates the foreigner. He spends no time getting to know Bellamy, nor does he care to do so. He is prejudiced against the man because he is an English traveler. Importantly, though, William's assessment is correct. Bellamy is not worthy of William's friendship or even his company. He is an evil man, setting out only to make mischief overseas. American opinions of Englishmen were proven correct in *The Forest Rose*. William assesses Bellamy immediately, but rather than overturning his quick assumptions, Woodworth proves his action wise; all English should be treated with caution and held at an arm's length.

²² Original emphasis included. Woodworth, *The Forest Rose*, 157.

²³ Woodworth, *The Forest Rose*, 157.

²⁴ Original emphasis. Woodworth, *The Forest Rose*, 157.

²⁵ Woodworth, *The Forest Rose*, 158.

Bellamy's treatment at the hands of Americans becomes even harsher at the end of the play. Bellamy wishes to run away with Harriet. He will use force, too, if she will not go willingly. In the last scene, Sally runs onto stage, interrupting a country dance, shouting that everyone present should run to save Harriet Miller. The crowd escorts the captured Bellamy and a veiled woman on stage. The audience and many of the characters know that this veiled woman is 'Lid Rose pretending to be Harriet. When questioned, the veiled woman silently agrees to the Englishman's promptings, indicating that she prefers him over William and that she looks on him with "the eye of affection"²⁶. When she is unveiled, she proclaims that she loves him, saying, "Massa Bellamy... you kissee me so sweet, in the grove, just now"²⁷. In the economy of lovers which is established in the script, Lid Rose is on the bottom²⁸. The assumption within the script is that kissing 'Lid Rose, and having to admit to it in public, is a terrible humiliation. Tellingly, Mr. Miller refers to his situation as Bellamy's "present mortification"²⁹. Bellamy strikes back, warning of his travelogue, but William diffuses his threat, saying, "And don't forget to notice the beauty and fragrance of our black roses"³⁰. Americans not only outsmart an Englishman in this play, but they also submit him to public humiliation. The characters yell taunts at Bellamy even after he exits the stage³¹. Americans who were still angry at Captain Basil Hall for his "betrayal" (as they saw it) would probably have enjoyed seeing an English traveler so abused by their American stage counterparts. They would have also enjoyed seeing a traveler dramaturgically disciplined on stage.

²⁶ Woodworth, *The Forest Rose*, 172.

²⁷ Woodworth, *The Forest Rose*, 172.

²⁸ The sexual economy in this script is both clear and multilayered. In Scene 4 one understands that Jonathan is less desirable a mate than Tom Clover because his father [Tom's] is a doctor. One also learns that Sally is less desirable than Harriet because her father [Harriet's] is a Squire. Lid Rose is on the bottom of this economy. Being fooled into kissing her—engaging with her sexually-- is just below being fooled into hugging a sack of samp-mortar all night long.

²⁹ Woodworth, *The Forest Rose*, 173.

³⁰ Woodworth, *The Forest Rose*, 173. Jeffery Richards speaks eloquently about the racism in this script in regards to 'Lid Rose in his article "Race and the Yankee: Woodworth's *The Forest Rose*" *Comparative Drama* 34. 1 (Spring 2000) 33-51.

³¹ For example, Jonathan yells after him: "How d'ye like onions?" Woodworth, *The Forest Rose*, 173.

Captain Basil Hall did not enjoy his time in America. He considered the United States a vulgar country without amusement, devoid of fun, and filled with cheerless persons. For example, Captain Hall complains about his experience at the Brighton Fair, saying, "...the peculiarity which struck me was the absence of talking, or laughing, or any hilarity of look or gesture. I never beheld any thing in my whole life, though I have been at many funerals, nearly so ponderous or so melancholy as this gloomy, lumbering, weary sort of merry-making". What he probably least expected, then, would be a comic play to erupt on the American stage, gaining popularity because of how it reminded audience members of him. He never would have expected that his visit would inspire American art so vibrant it would keep audiences laughing for the next 40 years as *The Forest Rose* did.