

Some Victorian views on American English

In common with many Victorians, especially in the early decades of the century (that is, not long after the American War of Independence), Henry Alford is incensed by Americanisms.

8. Look, to take one familiar example, at the process of deterioration which our Queen's English has undergone at the hands of the Americans. Look at those phrases which so amuse us in their speech and books; at their reckless exaggeration, and contempt for congruity; and then compare the character and history of the nation – its blunted sense of obligation and duty to man; its open disregard of conventional right where aggrandisement is to be obtained; and, I may now say, its reckless and fruitless maintenance of the most cruel and unprincipled war in the history of the world. [His book appeared in the 1860s, at the time of the American Civil War.]

14. The first remark that I have to make shall be on the trick now so universal across the Atlantic, and becoming in some quarters common among us in England, of leaving out the “u” in the termination “-our;” writing *honor, favor, neighbor, Savior, &c.* Now the objection to this is, not that it makes very ugly words, totally unlike anything in the English language before (for we do spell some of the words thus derived, for example, *author, governor, emperor, &c.*), but that it is part of a movement to reduce our spelling to uniform rule as opposed to usage, and to help forward the obliteration of all traces of the derivation and history of words.

Punch magazine regularly carried articles about them in the middle decades of the century.

(14 December 1861)

AN IMPROPER EXPRESSION.

THE QUEEN'S English is in great danger of being permanently debased by a vile word which has lately been introduced into it – the word “Reliable.” This base word was first coined in America, and thence imported into this country. It is about the worst word, not immoral, in the English language. Yet it is coming into very general use; you can hardly open a newspaper wherein it does not occur; and that even in the leading articles written by educated men who ought to know better than, at this crisis especially, to employ such an illiterate Yankeeism.

(5 February 1870)

AMERICAN SLANGOGRAPHY.

PEOPLE who have any reverence for “the pure well of English undefiled,” must wish that the Americans would let that well alone, and not defile it with such hideous constructions as the following:-

“One of the papers lately, instead of recording that the President had gone on an excursion, simply announced that he had ‘excurted’. The other day we read that ‘Erie’ was injuncted. A paragraph in an evening paper was headed thus – ‘A Woman Burgled Nine Times in Ten Years.’”

Fancy the dismay of dear old DR. JOHNSON at reading such uncouth phraseology as this! Imagine him devouring Yankee newspapers for breakfast! With how many a cup of tea could he gulp down, without choking, their grammarless contents?