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# **A Transatlantic ‘Field of Stars’: Redrawing the Borders of English Literature in the Late Nineteenth Century**

Rod Rosenquist

## **Abstract**

This article examines a map of the English coast surrounding Romney Marsh in 1895, hand-drawn by Ford Madox Ford for his memoir, *Return to Yesterday* (1931). The map is read as a cultural reconstruction of the shifting terrain of fin-de-siècle literary reputation, representing late-Victorian English letters as a distinctly transatlantic realm. Ford’s illustration is analysed as an early incarnation of the celebrity ‘star map’: it positions authors in specific locations, while also tracing constellations of developing alliances, dividing the aesthetically minded foreigners from a defensive grouping of British institutional icons. Ford redraws the centre and the boundaries of English literature through his act of map-making, positioning his ‘alien’ literary celebrities – including transatlantic icons of the late nineteenth century, like Henry James, Stephen Crane and W.H. Hudson – along the Romney coast, a site associated with invasion, fluid boundaries, and shifting coastlines.

Though there have been several books devoted to the group of writers to be found around the Romney Marsh, Sussex, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, including *Group Portrait* (1982) by Nicholas Delbanco, *The Sixth Continent* (1986) by Iain Finlayson and *A Ring of Conspirators* (2004) by Miranda Seymour, none have explored the role that literary fame plays in such a construction of cultural geography.<sup>1</sup> The socio-literary formulation of authorship,

from the very beginning of Romney's celebrated literary history, can be meaningfully framed in terms of transatlantic celebrity and constructions of literary personality, identity, and social formation, as I aim to show. It is also interesting to note that none of these histories of literary circles in Romney include W.H. Hudson, given his centrality to the narrative constructed by one of Romney's earliest literary historians, Ford Madox Ford, in his 1931 book of reminiscences, *Return to Yesterday*. This is partly because Hudson did not reside for long in New Romney, but also because he is not a literary celebrity of the rank of Henry James, Joseph Conrad, Stephen Crane, H.G. Wells, or even Ford himself, the famous names that make up the cast of characters driving the story of Romney's late nineteenth-century literary accomplishments.

But it is precisely Hudson's emerging reputation as an increasingly celebrated author that draws him into Ford's volume. Hudson arrived in East Sussex, according to Ford, shortly after Ford himself had first met James and Conrad – both fruitful acquaintances for a young author in terms of social, cultural and literary advancement. In those days, however, Hudson was not an author by vocation, according to Ford, but a naturalist who was 'at that date making a regular tour of the literary world as he at other times for sedulous and immobile days would watch the nests of cuckoos or the colonies of rooks in bare trees'.<sup>2</sup> Ford had direct experience of this, revealing the length of time he once stood with Hudson 'watching a rookery' and learning of the social groupings and habits of these birds. But Hudson had by this time grown interested in the social groupings and habits of more literary creatures. Ford goes on:

At the date of which I am speaking – in the last year of the last century –  
[Hudson] had before him the problem of whether or no he himself was a writer.  
He had always considered himself a naturalist. Now he was conscious that he was

regarded as a great writer by a great many writers. He had therefore – just as in the case of the rooks – set out to observe writers, visiting James, Conrad, Crane, round Rye and, I believe, Mr. H. G. Wells, Mr. Kipling and the Poet Laureate (Ford 21).

If Hudson wants to study the cultural category called ‘the author’, these are all exemplary figures, both now and during the period in question. But Hudson, who appeared to Ford to have no literary ambitions (despite having authored ten books by the time he comes to Romney), began to recognize the reception of his own authorial persona. He was a ‘great writer’ because he was considered such by ‘a great many writers’, mostly due to the craft with which he shaped the prose of his volumes of observations, says Ford. But the naturalist approach to categorization taken by Hudson – studying major authors in their natural environments – raises the more interesting questions: what is the difference between someone who writes and a person who is acknowledged as a writer? What modes of behaviour or cultural discourses must one perform to be included in this category of ‘great writer’, if not simply to have written something? Hudson is asking, in short, what *is* an author?

This last question is the title of the 1969 essay by Michel Foucault highly useful for exploring the discourse sustaining the cultural values of the author as celebrity. In ‘What is an Author?’, Foucault points out that the definition of an author is not simply located in an individual having written something, like a letter or a contract, but in that individual being recognized in cultural or social circles as the author of an established discourse. Foucault acknowledges that the author’s name does not function in isolation: ‘Its presence is functional in that it serves as a means of classification.... [I]ts status and its manner of reception are regulated

by the culture in which it circulates.<sup>73</sup> So long as he is watching the rooks, then, Hudson does not recognize himself as an author, but rather as one who observes, describes, and classifies the natural world. But as Hudson grows aware of his reception as an author – that his name has begun to function as a means of controlling the discourse of his writings and their circulation – he begins to look for different means of classification and different systems of cultural value. If one wants to observe the nature of rooks, go to a rookery; if one wants to observe the cultural status of the author in late nineteenth-century England, go to Romney.

This article will examine the retrospective constructions – Ford’s impressions, for he is an impressionist – of how the famous names of authors functioned within a particular place and time. Attention in the first section will be paid to the transatlantic nature of Ford’s celebrity authors and how he maps out the ‘author function’ across a neatly delineated terrain. The second section will examine the borders and boundaries Ford prescribes for his celebrity authors in relation to ideas on the celebrity as marker of national identity and culture. The final section looks at the geography of Romney itself as representative of Ford’s breaking down of stable literary centres and questioning the historical development of authorship in the nineteenth century as a more fluid idea of modern letters begins to emerge. Ford’s *Return to Yesterday* serves as a modernist review of the end of the Victorian age by an author who witnessed that end, just as it serves as a commentary by the editor of *The Transatlantic Review* on the age in which Ford created *The English Review*. This represents the significant shift evident in Ford’s demonstration and illustration of literary authorship starting in 1895, from the nationalist narrative of British cultural heritage – one dominated by literary celebrity, as we shall see – to a transatlantic view of international letters in English, an insurrection carried out by James, Crane, Hudson, and other literary ‘aliens’, a group to which Ford considers himself to belong. This

article then asserts that Romney serves as the centre, for Ford, of an emergent international concept of English literature built on modern ideas of celebrity tourism and pilgrimage, signalling demarcations of battle lines and invasions and illustrated by topographical maps drawn and redrawn as literature spins away from national urban centres into a more fluid, rural, and modern construction.

### **Transatlantic Pilgrimages and Celebrity Star Maps**

That Ford's portrait of famous authors at the end of the nineteenth century takes primary interest in nationality and transatlantic pilgrimage becomes clear from the very beginning of *Return to Yesterday*. The volume opens with James alongside Crane, two celebrity writers from 'Gotham' transplanted to England, but Ford also includes Hudson amongst the Americans – though he was born and raised in Argentina and wrote his many books in Britain – due to his 'pure New England blood' (Ford 20). In fact, Hudson's parents were of Anglo-Irish background, his father a second-generation American and his mother (with even stronger claim to New England origins) being 'of Pilgrim ancestry'.<sup>4</sup> These links between Romney and New England are emphasized even further in the first chapter, with detail pointing particularly to Ford's own home of Winchelsea: 'In the church were pews made of wood brought back from Plymouth by the *Mayflower*. That is the story' (Ford 13). The *Mayflower*, as conveyor of the 'Pilgrims' to America, then returned American 'souvenirs' to Winchelsea, though Ford reveals that 'a dim-sighted Early Victorian Rector' was removing the tulip-wood pews about this time, once more sending them across the Atlantic to 'souvenir hunters' in the United States (Ford 14). These two examples – Hudson's family and the *Mayflower* tulip-wood – establish the pattern of recirculation of transatlantic crossings that informs much of Ford's volume of memoirs,

including links between Winchelsea's grid-like streets and Manhattan's, or to Ford's own home between 1901 and 1906 – an imitation New Hampshire frame-house built in Winchelsea by General Prescott when feeling 'homesick' for North America (Ford 13). There is also James, transatlantic icon of Anglo-American literary relations, being led by his 'highly varnished dachshund' toward tea where the dog enjoyed 'fat rascals', a tea cake which Ford considers identical to hot biscuits from Tennessee (Ford 13). Ford's connections between the British county of Sussex and the North American continent are not particularly convincing, but it is clear that Ford wants to encourage his readers to see this particular geographical space as positioned in a history that transcends its finite borders. In this way, he rewrites the literary history of Romney within a wider context of international – particularly transatlantic – recirculation of forms, ideas, and values, most clearly centred on the celebrated authorial figure of James in Rye.

That this first chapter is about transatlantic pilgrimages is also evident in the title, 'Compostella Americana', proclaiming Romney a site of American pilgrimage. Though the reference to Santiago de Compostela may not be the most explicit, given the different spelling, it can be shown that Ford regularly misspelled Santiago de Compostela as 'Compostella' (it appears this way in two published volumes by Ford, *Cinque Ports* (1900) and *The Fifth Queen* (1906)). Furthermore, an early typescript of the chapter offers the title 'A Mecca for Americans', confirming that Ford views Romney as a quasi-religious destination for Americans.<sup>5</sup> In fact, the very nature of this kind of pilgrimage – driven by literary celebrity and cultural values of authorship – may in this case be neatly underlined by Ford's misspelling, since it emphasizes one possible etymological origin of the word Compostela itself – the derivation from the Latin *Campus Stellae*, or 'Field of Stars' – thereby opening his volume of memoirs with an American star map as seen from this southern corner of Great Britain. While Ford writes his memoir in the

golden age of the Hollywood star system, the term ‘star’ as used to represent ‘an exceptional celebrity; or one whose name is prominently advertised as a special attraction to the public’ had been in circulation since the 1820s.<sup>6</sup> Ford’s description of Romney as site of American pilgrimage, then, increasingly takes the shape of the nineteenth-century celebrity values that influence his volume and appears to have influenced his own experience of the region at the time of his own intimacy with the authorial figures – the literary ‘stars’ of his age. That Ford is seeking to outline, in Part 1 of *Return to Yesterday*, the specific constellations of celebrated authorial names – their connections, their proximities and intimacies, as well as their rivalries – suggests that this particular sense of ‘Compostella Americana’ is employed to lay out the terrain on which famous American literary names and their related celebrity values might be traced and pulled forward into relief.

Ford’s ‘Field of Stars’ takes on a more physical construction in the second chapter, as he aims to map out just why Romney had become a place of pilgrimage. Shortly after describing Hudson seeking out James, Rudyard Kipling, Conrad, and Wells as models of celebrated authorship, he produces a map to illustrate the geographical proximity of these stellar names (see figure 1). With an attached date of 1895, this map provides a visual geographic depiction of the more celebrated names in English literature in the last years of the nineteenth century. It is, naturally, a visual illustration of a territory, as all maps, but clearly the emphasis is not on geography, topography, transport, or population centres, but is based almost entirely on the celebrity terrain of the area with its only features being famous literary authors. The use of proper names, as Foucault makes clear in ‘What is an Author?’, is key to the construction of authorial discourse, and here that discourse is laid out geographically to provide visual signs of proximity and intimacy. Thomas Hardy, John Galsworthy, and George Meredith – some of the



most significant names of late nineteenth-century English literature – do not appear on the map itself, but their names are included to give positional coordinates to the literary constellation of

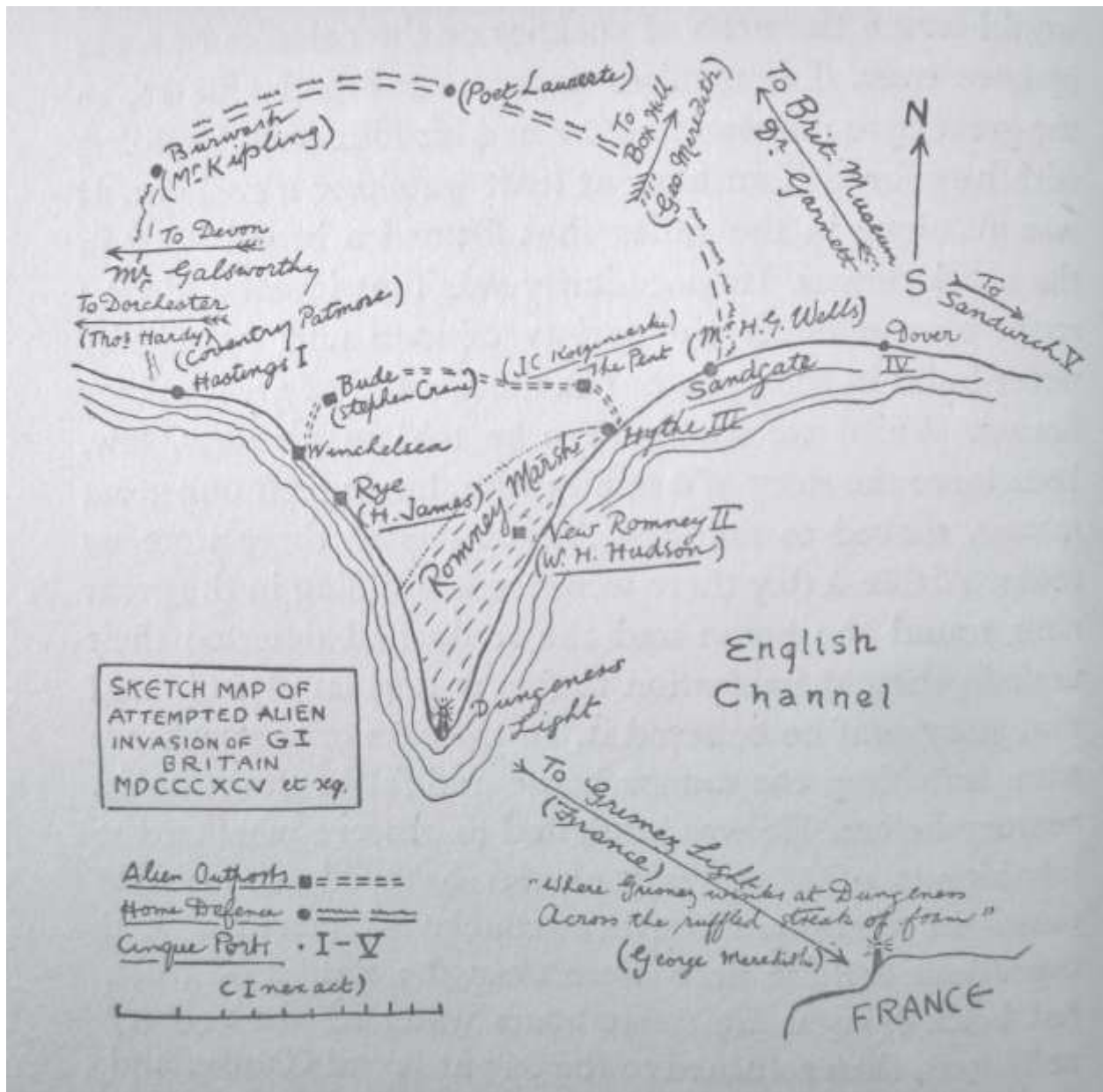


Figure 1: Ford's hand-drawn map of Romney from the first edition of *Return to Yesterday* (London: Gollancz, 1931)

Ford's protagonists in James, Crane, Hudson, and Conrad (written here as J.C. Korzeniowski, Conrad's given name), as well as the other authors in the immediate vicinity: Wells, Kipling, Coventry Patmore, and a figure only labelled 'Poet Laureate'. At that time, as Ford informs his

readers, the Poet Laureate was Alfred Austin, but Austin was an unpopular choice for the role, and mostly forgotten as a poet by the time Ford's reminiscences are published, so his proper name does not carry the cultural value that his title affords. After all, if this is a map of celebrity authors – the 'field of stars' as it looks from Romney – the name of Austin does not perform Foucault's 'author-function' unless he is brought into the discourse of literary history through the endorsement of his honorific role in English letters.

Ford's hand-drawn illustration of Romney's literary terrain serves both as a map but also as an assertion of cultural value and literary history. It illustrates the intimate proximity of a number of notable authors and lays out the geographical terrain that makes Romney a destination for the author and the literary tourist alike – a map of literary shrines for those who, by 1931, want to search out the homes of literary celebrities. In this way, it is a forerunner of the contemporary 'star map' – those popular documents sold to tourists to find the various homes of celebrities in a single geographical spot, whether in Hollywood, London or New York. As one of the few historians of these texts, Simon Garfield surveys 1960s celebrity star maps, relating that despite the highly polished surfaces of the star image and their celebrity homes that form the subject, the early maps are 'hand-drawn and authentically primitive, the sort of lines one might make to direct someone to a petrol station.'<sup>7</sup> Ford's map, some thirty years earlier, provides a similar aesthetic and function, conveying Ford's eye-witness account of the personality, intimacy, and authenticity of Romney's moment of celebrity. But when Garfield goes on to describe 1960s celebrity cartographies as 'a stalker's map from more innocent times', it raises the question: for whom is Ford's map produced, and who might play the role of celebrity stalker? Is it Hudson, the naturalist surveying the Romney field of stars? Ford himself, who does not appear on his own celebrity map? The readers of Ford's volume of reminiscences? The fact that

at the time of publication, the map is already historical – already out of date (and perhaps, as we shall see, never ‘in date’) – reveals that the map does not function in this way. As Garfield goes on to say, ‘The maps work well not just as location devices, but equally as social documents’, charting the social and cultural interests of the map-maker, the map-readers and the celebrity subjects who appear ‘on the map’ at the same time.<sup>8</sup> While Ford’s map may not be fully functional to the literary tourist who wants to visit these homes – there is too little detail, such as road markings or even, in several cases, the names of villages or towns – it does play into the discourse Foucault describes as the ‘author-function’, where the names on the map begin to represent cultural values, alliances, oppositions, or nationalities. Rather than providing a map for the stalkers of celebrities, interested in glimpses of James, Conrad, or Crane – all dead by the time the map is published – Ford’s sketch presents a cultural reconstruction of English letters in relation to more transatlantic values and changing reputations, all via a visual representation of the literary field of stars.

### **Nationality, Cultural Space, and Foreign Invasion**

One question arising from the ongoing emphasis Ford places on Romney as a site of literary pilgrimage is why exactly this particular geographic locale, out of the whole of Great Britain, should feature so prominently in his retrospective view of late nineteenth-century English letters? Why should Romney feature as a ‘Mecca for Americans’ when, as Iain Finlayson reveals, ‘Romney Marsh did not, in the early years of the nineteenth century, possess any long or distinguished tradition of letters’? In fact, as he goes on to say, ‘That it later acquired a literary reputation was – and continues to be – due to incomers who have settled and worked in this apparently improbable outpost of England and the civilisation to which it pretends.’<sup>9</sup> In other

words, Romney's reputation as a geographic centre of literature arises despite (or even, as we shall see, because of) its lack of literary tradition, its sense of being an 'outpost' far from other literary centres, or the foreign 'incomers' who bring with them only the pretence of a cultural heritage. Romney Marsh would surely not feature in a nineteenth-century literary history written before 1895, despite brief references to the region in literary work by Kipling, Patmore, and, earlier, Richard Barham in the *Ingoldsby Legends* (1840–47). But as Ford's 1931 map suggests, a more modern perspective places this 'obscure outpost' most squarely at the centre of the late Victorian literary scene, not due to Romney Marsh as the subject or setting for literature, but purely because of the famous names of those 'incoming' authors settling in the region. Ford's star map, then, is built on a celebrated incursion of outsiders into the stronghold of English letters, leaving only arrows to refer to the iconic literary centres of the British nation.

A number of studies of nineteenth-century celebrity and literature have revealed the significant relationship between celebrity authors and concepts of nationality. Jason Goldsmith, for example, has revealed the parallels between the development in the nineteenth century of mass-media celebrity and the modern nation state, arguing, 'Both memorialise their subjects. Both generate new models of consciousness and identification. Both are based on a regime of publicity and spectacle.'<sup>10</sup> Alexis Easley also writes about literary celebrity in the Victorian period as related to categories of identity, including gender and nationality. She writes, 'In the second half of the nineteenth century, London was viewed as the very center of nineteenth-century literary culture.'<sup>11</sup> And yet, as Easley goes on to reveal, London in this period was in a state of flux, difficult to identify and incapable of being determined by specific sites of cultural meaning without some mediation. Ford acknowledged as much at the time, writing in 1905, 'London offers to the mind's eye singularly little of a picture. It is essentially "town," and

yet how little of a town, how much of an abstraction. One says, “He knows his London,” yet how little more will he know of London than what is actually “his.”<sup>12</sup> In fact, London as the centre of English literary culture was largely a production, as Easley reveals, of ‘periodicals, guidebooks, and photographic inventories’ all employed in searching for ‘the city’s timeless cultural landmarks’ in order to produce a stable centre to the developing and fluid modern British identity. This leads to one of Easley’s main arguments: ‘By retelling history and marking the landscape with memorials to great writers past, the cult of celebrity fostered an illusion of stability during a time of rapid social change.’<sup>13</sup> Literary tourism of London between 1850 and 1910, Easley suggests, helped to preserve a coherent narrative of British cultural values, while allowing individuals to locate these meanings within individual homes and other cultural sites. She argues, ‘Literary tourists found truth on an individual basis through intimate encounters with personally meaningful authors and places. At the same time, they situated their individual experiences within a network of broader national and cultural meanings.’<sup>14</sup> Literary celebrity and tourism, then, established a discourse of what Easley calls ‘bio-geographical criticism’ evident in the periodical press at that time, capable of constructing ‘a sense of British national identity by locating the literary shrines of London and those of Great Britain more generally at the center of a growing transatlantic literary culture.’<sup>15</sup>

Ford’s celebrity star map seeks to achieve similar things, looking back with some nostalgia upon a bio-geographical, late-Victorian scene of famous literary names. But his model of the British literary geography is not set in London, and it is quite clearly not intended to sustain British national values. The title of Ford’s map, in fact, refers to ‘the attempted alien invasion’ of Great Britain, with the legend containing symbols for each ‘alien outpost’ and ‘home defence’. This scene of invasion illustrates and identifies the celebrated names of

‘foreign’ authors pushing against the stalwart defence of English literature, with resistant military positions manned by British figures like Wells, Kipling, and the Poet Laureate. For Ford, the stable centre of English letters – represented, at least abstractly, by a celebrity-mediated image of London – is under attack and transatlantic literary culture can only be mapped out in terms of battle lines and fortifications. Certain famous literary names represent the establishment – Hardy, Patmore, and Meredith – while others represent the incursion, led by American celebrities like James and Crane, but also including other authors of ‘foreign’ extraction. Ford emphasizes their ‘alien’ nature through his employment of proper names, opting to leave Conrad’s anglicized name off the map, identifying him as Korzeniowski the foreigner. Even Ford himself, while referring back to these four ‘alien’ authors launching an invasion of English letters (James, Crane, Hudson, and Conrad), includes his own authorial figure in their company by citing both Crane and James referring to his foreign surname of Hueffer (as it was before he changed it following World War I) in order to indicate on which side of the battle lines he finds himself (Ford 29, 161).

If Ford’s title and date for his illustration, ‘Sketch map of attempted alien invasion of Great Britain’ in 1895, sounds like a fanciful narrative belonging to H. G. Wells, it turns out it is. Ford reveals that the idea of an invasion of the stronghold of literary Britain was originally the conception of Wells, who ‘wrote to the papers to say that for many years he was conscious of a ring of foreign conspirators plotting against British letters’ (Ford 21). But Wells was not alone, of course, in using fiction to illustrate widespread anxiety over national identity and territorial integrity in the late nineteenth century, as invasion literature had become widely popular, starting with George Tomkyns Chesney’s *The Battle of Dorking* (1871) and including William LeQueux’s *The Great War in England in 1897* (1894). Ford’s sketch of the south coast of

England in 1895 builds on these narratives, offering his map, he tells his readers, in order to show ‘how judicious were Mr. Wells’ views’ (Ford 22). However, while Wells opts to present the ‘alien’ authors in a ring, apparently surrounding Wells in his isolated outpost in Sandgate, Ford rather chooses to position the ‘foreign conspirators’ as themselves surrounded by Wells, Austin, Kipling, and Patmore, ‘a patriotically protective ring round that settlement of aliens’ – reinforced further afield by Hardy, Galsworthy, Meredith, and Richard Garnett, the last of whom Ford identifies according to his institutional position as the ‘Principal Librarian of the British Museum’, consequently a figurehead for British culture and letters (Ford 21). Regardless of whether the foreign writers surround Wells, or Wells forms part of a defensive line surrounding the aliens, there is awareness on both sides, according to Ford, that an invasion is taking place, where notable authors of literature written in English are encroaching from across the sea upon the cultural strongholds and institutional repositories that puts emphasis on the Englishness of English letters: the Poet Laureate, the British Museum, or Kipling, one-time vice president of the Royal Society of St George, a patriotic society devoted to preserving England and Englishness founded the year prior to the date of Ford’s map. If celebrity authors and their homes had, during the latter half of the nineteenth century, helped map out English nationalism and provided, through London in particular, a stable centre to British culture and heritage, Ford’s illustration is clearly focused on mapping out the incursion and possible overthrow of that stable centre at the end of the century.

It is not just his illustrative map that reveals Ford’s intention to focus on Romney as ‘bio-geographical criticism’ of English cultural history. Ford spends much of his book of memoirs recounting his chosen transatlantic and ‘alien’ authors because he considers them central to the evolution of English letters. In his opinion, Romney is no longer the ‘improbable

outpost' of British values, but the very centre of a new, modern version of an international 'republic of letters'. Ford says:

For indeed, those four men – three Americans and one Pole – lit in those days in England a beacon that posterity shall not easily let die. You have only got to consider how empty, how lacking a nucleus, English literature would to-day be if they had never lived, to see how discerning were Mr. Wells' views of that foreign penetration at the most vulnerable point of England's shores (Ford 22).

If, as Easley suggests, London had become the conceptual stable centre of English letters via the mapping out of homes and haunts of various British authorial celebrities, Ford, from his twentieth-century vantage point, maps out the alternative view at the end of the Victorian period. Romney is now the centre, the 'nucleus' according to Ford, English literature having been left 'empty' without these foreign conspirators launching an invasion at the most vulnerable point in the defence of English letters. Though Ford would go on to found *The English Review*, a periodical that sounds like another institutional centre for British literary culture, he appears to share the subversive ambitions of Conrad, who chose that title because he 'felt a certain sardonic pleasure in the choosing so national a name for a periodical that promised to be singularly international in tone, that was started mainly in his not very English interest and conducted by myself who was growing every day more and more alien to the normal English trend in thought' (Ford 284). Romney, without its own literary heritage or history, was the non-institutional home for modern literature in English, the place from which the transatlantic stars continue to shine throughout posterity, providing an antidote to London. Elena Lamberti has described Ford's own



perspective on that city, which, she argues, ‘Ford uses metonymically as a symbol for a wider, philistine and materialistic Anglosaxondom (something that, in Ford’s view, opposes his idea of an International Republic of Letters)’.<sup>16</sup> From the evidence in *Return to Yesterday*, we can see that at the end of the nineteenth century, Ford’s literary stars make Romney the capital for this transnational ideal.

### **Romney Marsh, Topography, and the Liquid Modern**

As Miranda Seymour and others have pointed out, there is little validity in Wells’s first assertion or Ford’s visual construction of battle lines around the Romney peninsula. Even Ford’s five aliens – James, Conrad, Crane, Hudson, and himself – are only tenuously linked in the manner that he suggests: ‘Only by topography and date can they be neatly yoked together as sharers in a common cause. They had no such united purpose’.<sup>17</sup> But speaking more figuratively, Ford clearly wants to use this ‘alien’ grouping in order to emphasize the successful invasion of the institutional centres of English literature, pointing to the establishment of a new ‘nucleus’ at a ‘vulnerable point’ in British defence of its cultural heritage. Romney is an important location for this, not just in the immediate history of late nineteenth-century literature, but in terms of identifying emergent, more fluid concepts of nationality and culture placed upon the backdrop of continental and geological change. If, as Seymour suggests, only topography and date link these celebrity authors, Ford’s illustration of Romney in 1895 reveals the extent to which even time and place produce highly fluid constructions. In positioning these opposing groups of celebrity authorial names on his Romney map, Ford is linking a distinctive shift in cultural values to a stretch of land defined by ongoing change: a history of invasion and smuggling, of changing coastlines and land reclamation, and of indefinite national identity.

That this is the case is already evident from Ford's map, prominently identifying the close proximity of France to the Dungeness headland. Hastings, site of the famous battle, is also an easily recognizable symbol of foreign invasion and national vulnerability to infiltration. The other Cinque Ports identified on Ford's map would similarly remind Ford's post-World War I readers of the threat of 'foreign penetration' of British sovereign territory. But the proximity to foreign regions is not only a threat. On Ford's map, the Dungeness Light is linked via a hand-drawn arrow to the Gris-Nez Lighthouse – twin beacons of a shared border across the English Channel, one winking at the other, according to the lines of Meredith that Ford misquotes in the bottom corner. Ford opens the second chapter of his memoir with similar imagery of a shared relationship, recounting that the nearness to France was surely one reason his famous foreign authors all chose to settle in Romney Marsh. The French influence on the aesthetics of these modern writers – particularly James – is well documented and there is a connection suggested between the aestheticist approach of the 'aliens' and the French mainland so near to Romney. Wells himself acknowledged in his 1934 autobiography that there was a clear link between the 'foreign conspirators' in Romney and encroaching French aestheticism – represented in the following passage by Flaubert's *mot juste*, though Wells translates it into English: 'All this talk that I had with Conrad and Hueffer and James about the just word, the perfect expression, about this or that being "written" or not written, bothered me'.<sup>18</sup> Wells was initially attracted to (in a line he writes about Conrad) 'that "foreign" flavour which the normal Anglo-Saxon mind habitually associates with culture', but after recognizing the battle lines between the foreign celebrity authors and the greater good of the nation, he concludes, 'So I came down off the fence ... and I remain definitely on the side opposed to the aesthetic valuation of literature.'<sup>19</sup>

The foreignness of Romney's celebrity aesthetes, then, is linked to the proximity of the Continent, but equally it is linked to the sea, as the transatlantic James, Crane, and Hudson represent the influx of American culture from across the ocean. The newness of the American contingent is played up by Ford, remarking that before 'Columbus committed his indiscretion', there was the saying: 'These be the four quarters of the world: Europe, Asia, Africa and the Romney Marsh' (Ford 20). The discovery of the Americas naturally updates the terrain, but not the aim to place Romney at the centre. The later and better-known aphorisms in this vein tout Romney as one of the continents of the world, at once promoting the region as a cultural centre while separating it from continental Europe – and even the rest of the British Isles. The boundary lines of the sea, however, present the most compelling case for Ford's Romney as representative of a new and more modern sense of transnational English letters – a coast represented by a clearly demarcated black line on Ford's map but, as Ford acknowledges in more places than one, a line that needs continual redrafting if the history of England – and a constituent map of English literature – is to be sketched.

Ford was, after all, not only a literary historian of late-Victorian authors in 1931, but also a social historian of the Cinque Ports in 1900, revealing the dramatic changes to topography in the region across the ages. Ford describes each of the towns in some detail, revealing the past glories offered by the benefits of the sea, but also that 'what the sea gave the sea took away'.<sup>20</sup> The history of the region is one of shifting coastlines, as towns are built on the sea, only to have foundations eroded by encroaching seas or, perhaps just as bad, left high and dry when the sea ebbs away, far from the coast that nourishes a port town – as Ford's map reveals to be the case for 'ports' like Rye, Winchelsea, and New Romney. Only a few pages before Ford produces his map of the region – asserting, perhaps, the ascendancy of a new type of

cult literary figure – he informs his readers that the region is fluid, unstable, and ultimately unlike the secure centre of literary London in representing the institutional power of English literature. Ford says, ‘Once it was sea where the Marsh now is: one day it will be so again’ (Ford 19). If Romney represents the new nucleus of English literature – produced largely by transplanted and alien Americans, and marked by defensive-minded national fortifications – it is a centre that cannot hold, and is marked by fluidity and change. It is, the sayings suggest, a cornerstone of the Earth, a continent on its own, but also, Ford reminds us, not even a stable or permanent stretch of the coastline of the British Isles.

John Brannigan has recently suggested that increased attention to coastal boundaries and islands provided key metaphors for questioning the threats to the British nation as a whole at the time in which Ford was writing. In *Archipelagic Modernism*, Brannigan opens with discussion of Richard Jefferies’s 1885 novel *After London* – a fitting context for Ford’s discussion of Romney, as it is a novel where alterations in sea levels and coastlines renders the stable centre of the British Empire, London (spoken of only in the past tense) nothing more than marshland.<sup>21</sup> Brannigan also, for example, quotes from a news piece in June 1939, after reports suggested a group of islands could not be found where the map suggested they should be: “‘Continents at least stay, for practical purposes, where they are’”, declared the *Times* editorial, “‘no matter with what commotions man may distract their surfaces; but there is no counting on islands.’”<sup>22</sup> But Romney, according to Ford writing eight years earlier, serves as both stable centre and fragile periphery simultaneously, a tiny continent lodged at the foot of a faltering island, yet a continent that was once entirely submerged beneath the sea. Rye and Winchelsea, those two centres of modern English literature for Ford, were once islands themselves according to Roman maps – islands in a sea that was drained to make them ports, as Ford’s history makes

clear, later transformed by storm and shifting topography into inland towns, left dried up and purposeless. As Ford concludes his volume on *The Cinque Ports*, he imagines a future where the port towns will one day flourish again, regaining relevance at the spot where ‘the Makeshift even will have its principality’.<sup>23</sup>

For Zygmunt Bauman, this sense of ‘the makeshift’, what he terms fluidity and liquidity, is a symptom of different phases of modernity itself. For Ford, the fluid conceptualization of modern English letters can only come via first positioning the ‘alien’ authors of a largely transatlantic background within a single geographic terrain that is itself dominated by a history of fluid boundaries and altering topography – essentially grounding the celebrated names of modern, transnational literature in a terrain simultaneously continental in stature yet dominated by the sea and by fluid structures and shapes. Ford’s map is at once a concrete, black-and-white model of the relations of major names in English letters, with clear contours of the British soil upon which the foreign invasion takes place, but also, due to Romney’s geological fluidity, an unstable, impressionistic, and immaterial representation of modern reputation and literary value. Ford concludes this chapter of his memoir, in fact, by reminding his readers that ‘those four, all gods for me’ are ‘now all dead, a fact which seems to me incredible still. For me they were the greatest influence on the literature that has followed after them.... For the moment I have been trying to make them live again in your eyes’ (Ford 29-30). Literature, history, nationalism, and even topography, Ford’s map suggests, are temporary and mobile concepts, but Ford still intends to promote the celebrated names of his transatlantic stars. He draws his celebrity star map in spite of its uselessness as guide to those icons since departed, a history of a region that itself continues to shift, because it allows the stars space to shine. As Bauman argues in *Liquid Modernity*, observing that liquids cannot be contained by

time or place, ‘Descriptions of fluids are all snapshots, and they need a date at the bottom of the picture.’<sup>24</sup> Ford’s map provides this kind of snapshot of shifting literary reputations, stamped with place and time, despite the fact Romney itself is a shifting continent and ‘MDCCCXCV *et seq.*’ is a shifting date. In fact, Ford’s snapshot itself is called into question by his attached date, since none of the prominent authors on the map were lodged in these locations as early as 1895. At that date, James and Conrad were mainly based in literary centre of London, Crane in New York, and Hudson, wandering southern England, was naturally not yet drawn to Romney for its models of authorship.<sup>25</sup> Only Ford was based in Aldington in 1895, already imagining perhaps the literary culture of the place; but his impressionistic use of celebrity names to fix a fluid time and place only serves to make his map, not a historical or photographic snapshot, but a reconstruction of his own personal mental ecology.

Not unlike Easley’s recognition that celebrity authorship in London served as stable centre to the rapidly changing ideas on British identity, Bauman also recognizes in celebrity a symbol of coherence and stability, arguing that ‘they provide a sort of glue that brings and holds together otherwise diffuse and scattered aggregates of people’.<sup>26</sup> But rather than stabilizing figures, Bauman finds they too are fluid in the manner of their construction. Bauman argues, ‘Unlike fame, notoriety is as episodic as life itself in a liquid modern setting [...] each one leaping out of nowhere only to sink shortly into oblivion’.<sup>27</sup> This distinction is important, recognizing the development of renown across the modern period, described for example by Nicholas Dames as shifting from fame to notability, through lionising, to a more general and fluid celebrity.<sup>28</sup> Ford’s reconstruction of Romney at the end of the nineteenth century reflects this development, identifying national figures of institutional British culture in Austin, Kipling, and Garnett, but also offering a more intimate collection of foreign authors visiting one another’s

homes, collaborating, debating the purpose of literature, and seeking answers to the question, ‘What is an Author?’ That Hudson arrives in Romney wondering whether he would qualify for this category reveals the fluid boundaries around not only vocation but reputation and the public discourse of celebrity. Hudson and Crane rise and sink in the marshland of Romney, while James establishes himself in Lamb House on the island of Rye, a beacon for posterity. Bauman asserts that ‘liquid modernity is [the celebrity’s] natural ecological niche’, and for a brief period in the last years of the Victorian age, the emergent modern literary celebrity is perfectly symbolized by the mental ecology of Ford’s ‘field of stars’ in Romney.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Nicholas Delbanco, *Group Portrait: Joseph Conrad, Stephen Crane, Ford Madox Ford, Henry James, and H.G. Wells* (New York: Morrow, 1982), Iain Finlayson, *The Sixth Continent: A Literary History of Romney Marsh* (New York: Atheneum, 1986), Miranda Seymour, *A Ring of Conspirators: Henry James and His Literary Circle 1895-1915* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2004). See also chapter 4 of Michael P. Farrell, *Collaborative Circles: Friendship Dynamics and Creative Work* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Ford Madox Ford, *Return to Yesterday*, ed. Bill Hutchings (Manchester: Carcanet, 1931), 20. Subsequent parenthetical references will refer to this edition.

<sup>3</sup> Michel Foucault, ‘What is an Author?’ in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980), 113-138.

<sup>4</sup> J. J. Parodiz, *Darwin in the New World* (Leiden: Brill, 1981), 92.

<sup>5</sup> A typescript of this first chapter is available in the Ford Madox Ford Collection at the Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library, Box 19 Folder 10, and mentioned on the detailed Container List on the website: <http://rmc.library.cornell.edu/EAD/htmldocs/RMM04605.html>

<sup>6</sup> ‘star, n.5a’, *OED Online*, March 2015, Oxford University Press, [www.oed.com/view/Entry/189081](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/189081) (accessed May 07, 2015).

<sup>7</sup> Simon Garfield, *On the Map: Why the World Looks the Way it Does* (London: Profile, 2013), 321.

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- <sup>8</sup> Garfield, *On the Map*, 321.
- <sup>9</sup> Finlayson, *Sixth Continent*, p. 2.
- <sup>10</sup> Jason Goldsmith, 'Celebrity and the Spectacle of Nation' in *Romanticism and Celebrity Culture 1750-1850*, ed. Tom Mole (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 21.
- <sup>11</sup> Alexis Easley, *Literary Celebrity, Gender, and Victorian Authorship, 1850-1914* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2011), 27.
- <sup>12</sup> Ford Madox Hueffer, *The Soul of London* (London: Alston Rivers, 1905), 3.
- <sup>13</sup> Easley, *Literary Celebrity*, 11.
- <sup>14</sup> Easley, *Literary Celebrity*, 13.
- <sup>15</sup> Easley, *Literary Celebrity*, 13.
- <sup>16</sup> Elena Lamberti, 'Real Cities and Virtual Communities: Ford and the International Republic of Letters' in *Ford Madox Ford and the City*, ed. Sara Haslam, *International Ford Madox Ford Studies 4* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005), 146.
- <sup>17</sup> Seymour, *Ring of Conspirators*, 15.
- <sup>18</sup> H. G. Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1934), 623.
- <sup>19</sup> Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography*, 616, 623.
- <sup>20</sup> Ford Madox Hueffer, *The Cinque Ports: A Historical and Descriptive Record* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood & Sons, 1900), 22.
- <sup>21</sup> John Brannigan, *Archipelagic Modernism: Literature in the Irish and British Isles 1890-1970* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 1-2.
- <sup>22</sup> Brannigan, *Archipelagic Modernism*, 144.
- <sup>23</sup> Hueffer, *The Cinque Ports*, 372.
- <sup>24</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000), 2.
- <sup>25</sup> It is possible that all the constituent authors might have been in their places on the map in 1899, but with Ford, as many critics have pointed out, all truths are impressionistic and one does not do well to look for hard fact, but rather fluid interpretation. According to Max Saunders, Ford 'relished contracting circumstantial untruths for sale.' Max Saunders, *Ford Madox Ford: A Dual Life*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 118.
- <sup>26</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Life* (Cambridge: Polity, 2005), 50.
- <sup>27</sup> Bauman, *Liquid Life*, 50.
- <sup>28</sup> Nicholas Dames, 'Brushes with Fame: Thackeray and the World of Celebrity' in *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 56, 1, (2001), 23-51.