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What Defines an “American:” The Interconnected Works of Smith, Franklin, and Crevecoeur

Many people in the United States boldly say today, “I am proud to be an American.” But do they know what these words truly mean? Have they any idea where the identity of an “American” comes from and what literary and cultural history have contributed toward its definition? While no true definition of an “American” can be contained in a single description, key elements are articulated through the messages, feelings, and expressions of the canon of the early (proto) United Statsian writers of this country. From the effervescent journals of John Smith and the witty pamphlets of Benjamin Franklin to the evocative letters of the “farmer” Crevecoeur, a true “American” is one who proudly embodies the sheer sense of newness this land provides and asserts the democratic belief in the ideal through hard work. These concepts helped found the “American dream,” which is the firm conviction that upward social mobility and financial success are possible through individual ingenuity and industry. Throughout his work, Crevecoeur repeatedly tries to find an answer to the question, “What is an American?” (Crevecoeur 311). Although the “accepted” response remains elusive to this day, we may continue to come closer to reaching it through reading and analyzing the works of these three influential people in the history of this nation. Thus, John Smith, Benjamin Franklin, and Hector Crevecoeur exemplify the trajectory of determined people whose written works signify what it means to be a free and confident “American” through their unique reinventions of self, and how these evolutions over time resulted in the motifs of the boasting United Statsian and an exceptionalistic country.

Without a doubt, one of the first (proto) United Statsians to “stake his claim” in the New World was John Smith. “A previous English soldier and explorer, Smith is famous for his role in the founding and settling of Jamestown in 1607” (Canada 7). In doing so, he came to this nation with confident goals and ambitions, envisioning a new land free from the societal constraints and oppressive nature of the monarchies in Europe. As later seen by other famous United Statsians, this revolutionary and optimistic outlook is an essential component in being a true “American.” Smith was well-known for his “hard-to-control temper” and “stubborn self-reliance” in the past, having served a variety of occupations and even being held a prisoner of war (Smith 44). He likely saw in the colonization of America another opportunity to reinvent himself and thus attain widespread acclaim. In fact, “a major part of the definition of the reinvented ‘American self’ can be seen through Captain John Smith’s first writing… claiming” that even the ‘riffraff’ of society can come to this country and find great yield (Gura 264). While England was intent on upholding its royal line and imperial dominance during the 1600s, Smith saw in the fledgling America a chance to construct a new land based on individualistic and promising ideals, with himself acting as a leader in the forefront. He appealed to the social outcasts and those just beginning to plan their lives, urging them to come to this land of opportunity and potential gain. Although Smith was ultimately deemed too troublesome and stormy-tempered by his fellow colonists to remain (having had “a gunpowder bag mysteriously explode in his lap” that forced him back to Europe), he was nevertheless a key figure in this country’s history and one of the first true United Statsians (Smith 44).

Smith’s reinvention of self in coming to America also helped spark the pervasive belief that this nation’s sense of newness offered hope and prospective success for those who ventured here. While in the Old World the chance for people to improve their social status or life opportunities were severely limited, the works of “Captain John Smith, a chronicler of beginning settlement… helped profess that the subjects of will and hard work” would instead make a valuable difference in this New World (Canada 5). One of his prominent texts, “A Description of New England,” specifically acts as not only a portrayal of the future United States’ richness and beauty, but also as a deliberate petition to persuade other individuals to try their fortune here as well. Temperamental and mulish as he was, Smith was also very intelligent—one of his primary motives in his writing was not only to gain fame for himself, but to further encourage others in Europe to colonize and populate the “recently settled” America. He attempted to do so by embellishing the truth about the land; plentiful and fresh though it may have been, those who moved here probably did not “work but three days in seven, and still get more than they can spend” (Smith 56). Realizing that a variety of both skilled and (mostly) unskilled workers would consider his call, Smith cleverly includes in “A Description of New England” examples of how people of all occupations could stake their claim in this country. Fishermen, for instance, could “fish but an hour in a day, to take more than they eat in a week… or if they not eat it, sell it for more profit…” (Smith 56). Statements like these, however overstated, were still exceedingly useful in appealing to confident Europeans to venture here—Europeans that consequently became future “Americans.” Just as America prides itself on its humble beginnings (to its now worldwide power and influence), so too were its first colonists once considered the exiles and unwelcomed of society.

Evidenced by the fact that excerpts of his works often “stand at the head of most early American Literature anthologies,” John Smith is certainly influential in helping create a definition for the complex, elusive term “American” (Gura 260). Two individuals that were very likely to have been impacted by Smith’s founding role in this nation were Benjamin Franklin and Hector Crevecoeur. Both of these famous United Statsians similarly realized that a major part of being a citizen here had to do with the innovation and newness present in its very land. Franklin especially served as a model in recognizing that hard work and perseverance could surely enable people to ascend the social ladder and improve themselves. Because of the freedom and potential that America provides, he knew that “with our industry we will prosper… in the liberty of this country” (Franklin 224). Crevecoeur, too, was innately aware that United Statsians “develop an intimate relationship with the land, and see the landscape as a backdrop for opportunity” (Bishop 19). As a farmer and one who honestly trusted in the earth as a source of productivity and abundance, Crevecoeur likewise encouraged others to see for themselves all that this nation had to offer. These convictions of American pride and gratification from the land were evidently shaped by and ultimately the echoes of the early writings of John Smith. Acting as an inspirational figure to these later prime Americans, John Smith thus truly “internalized this nation so well that he helped make it part of the English—and Anglo-American—imagination” (Smith 45).

Benjamin Franklin is quite possibly one of the most renowned and respected figures in United States’ history, and for good reason. Despite his rather humble beginnings, he personally embodies the “American dream” of making a name for himself through his ingenuity and determination. Sometime when he was 17, Franklin “broke with his brother and ran away to Philadelphia,” revealing at even a young age his desire to reinvent himself and boldly prove his worth (Franklin 218). As his later writings showed, this brilliant man was very self-assured and aware of his intelligence, which led him to become a chief example of the daring and poised “American” citizen. Franklin likely foresaw that the United States would indeed become a powerful and enthralling country, and helped lay down its very foundation through his involvement “in drafting the Declaration of Independence” (Franklin 219). Even in his later years, Franklin’s vast contributions toward science and writing (such as conducting electricity and founding libraries) reinforced his stance that resolve and resourcefulness can lead to both notoriety and prosperity. Echoing the lives of Smith and the future Crevecoeur, Franklin was a living testament to the term, “a self-made man,” and certainly reflected his experiences and belief in the ideal through his craftily composed works. From his clever sayings to his witty use of pseudonyms, “one can recognize the skill with which Franklin wove his maxims together into a connected discourse, and appreciate the fun he had while doing so” (Lupton 6). With his individualistic nature and bravado-bearing persona, Franklin continued Smith’s legacy of creating the concept of the confident and hardworking American.

Franklin’s reinvention of himself further emphasized the United Statsian motifs of self-reliance and perseverance. His somewhat pompous and remarkably clever writing style can be observed in one of his most well-known texts, his preface to the *Poor Richard* pamphlet, “The Way to Wealth.” Within this essay Franklin shrewdly uses the pseudonym “Poor Richard,” and even goes so far as to include the very opposite of the self-effacing trope—“for though I have been, if I may say it without vanity, an eminent author” (Franklin 220). This disclaimer of sorts is rather ironic because the very statement most definitely exudes a sense of vanity, especially considering the longstanding success of the pamphlet. While the written word in European history was often targeted to the highly educated and upper social echelons, Franklin (well aware of his audience) knew that the best way to connect with the “American” people was to reach out to the run-of-the-mill, blue-collared citizens. Thus, “The Way to Wealth” is a work in which Franklin wisely appeals to his readers—his astute phrases petition to “the group of ‘common people’ who routinely buy his almanac” (Lupton 17). These “common people” were likely farmers and other diligent men who exemplified the American principles of firmness and hard work, which were notably the very same readers that Smith and Crevecoeur petitioned to. Nearly all of Franklin’s advice throughout his essay pushes aspiring United Statsians to make the most of their time and keep an organized, busy schedule in which to improve (and thus reinvent) themselves. Just like he did, Franklin claims that achieving success is possible through people’s industry and ingenuity. Just one of his many adages that support this belief is, “We may make these times better, if we bestir ourselves” (Franklin 221).

Benjamin Franklin has often been called a “hero of the 18th century” and a man of “deepest complexity,” if one who seemed a bit too intent on “seeking the way to wealth” (Franklin 220). His stubborn intellect and egocentric demeanor in many ways reflect the ambitious and proud John Smith; in a more positive light, both men’s optimistic outlook and passion for this country helped establish its “sense of self.” Further adding to the definition of what it means to be a United Statsian, Smith’s “survival in the Virginia wilderness made him one of the first American writers to explore the themes of self-creation, industry, practicality, and self-reliance” (Canada 8). All of these themes are consistently seen throughout Franklin’s works and might have very well influenced his own philosophical thoughts. Because of these contributions, Smith “is in many ways a precursor to other great American writers like Benjamin Franklin” (Canada 8). In the same vein, Hector Crevecoeur’s later works echo many of the beliefs reinforced by Franklin in “The Way to Wealth.” Crevecoeur’s self-boasting may not be as evident in his texts, but he certainly takes great pride and satisfaction in the country of America itself. Attributing the hardy people of this land to the robust and resilient nature of “men” in general, Crevecoeur notes that “the masculine identity can be found in the national identity” (Bishop 2). Since males should be satisfied with their hard work and all that they have accomplished here by themselves (without the assistance of an inheritance, for example), so too should they be pleased with the nation from which their prosperity was achieved. Thus, Benjamin Franklin played an intensely important role in United States’ history as one who carried the bold torch from individuals like John Smith and passed them on to future Americans like Hector Crevecoeur.

Though perhaps less identifiable than his predecessors Smith and Franklin, Hector Crevecoeur is nonetheless a significant figure in this country’s past and one who heavily influenced the definition of what it means to be an “American.” “A man with a mysterious past,” Crevecoeur was not even born in the United States, but rather in France (Crevecoeur 309). Remembered for his restlessness, there was quite possibly an intrinsic need for risk-taking and discovery that (despite not being a native-born citizen here) dwelled within him. Much like Americans are known for seeking new horizons and exploratory wandering, so too did Crevecoeur search for fulfillment, and very possibly found it in this nation. After coming to this nation and temporarily settling as an “American farmer,” Crevecoeur consequently reinvented himself, recognizing that while there was a definite “clash between the refined Europe and the rude America,” this New World offered something that the Old World couldn’t: a fresh start (Bishop 1). He realized that there was a promising uniqueness to this very land—an exceptionalism of the nation. Unlike the faith-based exceptionalism brought nearly two centuries earlier by John Winthrop and the Puritans, Crevecoeur noted that “Christian sects have worn out, and religious indifference has become prevalent” (Crevecoeur 314). In its place, Crevecoeur believed that this fruitful earth and the new, more secular-minded Americans that inhabited it were the keys that created this flourishing territory. His writings ultimately reveal that coming to the United States and joining the work force enable people to adopt the country’s individualistic principles and indeed become something wonderful and “new.”

Crevecoeur’s reinvention of self after arriving in this nation further underlines the exceptionalism within this land and his firm conviction that America is a location of both opportunity and distinction. In one of his most famous works, “Letters from an American Farmer,” Crevecoeur attempts to define an American based on the fact that once here, people are forever changed by the very landscape and idea that land may actually be “owned.” Unlike Europe, where there was little to no land left to purchase (let alone claim), “Crevecoeur’s depiction of the frontier was a place to escape and for new beginnings” (Bishop 12). Similarly to John Smith, he encouraged others from the Old World to come to America and make their fortunes here. Regardless of one’s past or social background, financial gain and upward mobility were once again possible through hard work and the cultivation of the United States’ rich, abundant earth. Much of Crevecoeur’s letters not only praise the sheer beauty and fertility of the landscape, but even compare the citizens to nature—“men are like plants… the goodness and flavor of the fruit proceeds from the peculiar soil and exposition in which they grow” (Crevecoeur 314). Echoing Benjamin Franklin, Crevecoeur appeals to the regular, ordinary country citizens, namely farmers and laborers. He states that once in America people have a chance to make a “fresh start,” a real prospect of reinventing themselves for the better. Instead of doing the least amount of work to get by (as was likely the ethic of most of the poor populace in Europe), there was actual incentive to go “from idleness… and servile dependence to a greater, different character” here because success was not only plausible, but even probable (Crevecoeur 313). Through his insights and personal contact with fellow United Statsians, Crevecoeur proved that one definition of being an “American” means to possess “a multidimensional identity where responsibility is to the self, the family, and to the gains of the land itself” (Bishop 16).

Hector Crevecoeur certainly inherited the exceptionalistic “American” legacy ignited by John Smith and sustained by Benjamin Franklin. He realized that to be a citizen of this country is not necessarily something that is influenced by place of birth, racial or political affiliation, or social status, but rather by one’s belief in becoming a greater individual through hard work, ingenuity, and pride in the land. Smith, too, saw that the potential in this nation would not emerge forth through modeling itself after England or France, but rather by crafting a new land focused on self-gain, perseverance, and bravado. In fact, Smith’s contextual writings helped first initiate the “myth of American exceptionalism” by claiming that the land of the future United States offers promise and new ideals that distinctly set it apart from the “Old World” (Gura 264). Franklin was another whose writings embody this country’s self-assured belief in its “right” to be dominant and high-ranking. “While ‘The Way to Wealth’ is not enduring or universal in the sense one might expect of reissued works today, its principles of individualism and reinvention reappear in contexts underlying the 18th century sense of what it means to be successful,” especially Crevecoeur’s texts (Lupton 8). In many ways, Franklin further connects to Crevecoeur’s writings because he too believed in “American industry,” and that practical use of the land and “recreating” oneself can lead to a new identity and accomplishment (Canada 8). Thus, Crevecoeur certainly reflects and contributed toward the definition of a full-fledged “American”—a definition that continues to evolve and develop over time. “That Crevecoeur’s chapter ‘What is an American’ is still widely anthologized” is testament to the fact that his writings helped define the distinctive and independent identity of this great country’s citizens (Bishop 23).

Because of their similar ideals in positive change, an optimistic hope for the future, and a potential reinvention of self in being an “American,” Smith, Franklin, and Crevecoeur have certainly earned the right to be called proud contributors to the founding of the United States. Each of these remarkable and influential authors wrote about what it means to be a true citizen of this country, and their works have lent themselves to inspiring the Americans of today. John Smith’s “A Description of New England” spoke of the bountiful prospects offered by this “New World” and the chance for a new beginning. Franklin’s “The Way to Wealth” continued these motifs of reinvention and elevated financial status through his bravado-bearing maxims of time management and a strong work ethic. Lastly, Crevecoeur enhances this evolving “American” definition by reinforcing that there is a profound sense of national exceptionalism through both its people and the land itself. Now while all three of these (proto) United Statsians emphasized the importance of the individual, it is significant to recognize that while we Americans pride ourselves on our individualism, perhaps it is time to focus on our sense of community and togetherness as well. In these trying times of political upheaval and financial uncertainty, hopefully we current United Statsians may follow the model set by the early Native Americans (the “true” first Americans), and focus less on any self-centered goals we might have and instead on the needs of the nation as a whole. In doing so, the United States might truly become the “New Golden Land” that the founding fathers envisioned this nation could become (Gura 265). Thus, John Smith, Benjamin Franklin, and Hector Crevecoeur are connected examples of self-determined people throughout this country’s history that embody what it means to be a free and confident “American.”

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