New Yorker in England: In Search of Antiquity in *The Sketch-Book*

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In *The Sketch-Book*, Washington Irving represents England as the country founded on its great traditions in spite of the social and cultural changes that overtook the conventional social order in the early 19th century. As demonstrated in his essays on Indian tribes, Irving feels a deep reverence for them, and laments the disappearance of their culture. The consciousness that his own country has lost the link with the past strengthens his yearning for old English customs. Although William Hazlitt regards Irving's applause for the preservation of English antiquity as his wily strategy for acquiring the conservative British readership, it seems that Irving's sense of rootlessness as an American reflects the fundamental attitude of this book.

Key Words: American literature, Washington Irving, *The Sketch-Book*, travel writing

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Ⅰ Introduction

Washington Irving's *The Sketch-Book* is one of the first books by American writers that succeeded both critically and commercially in England. American literature in Irving's days was rather neglected in the British literary circles. Sydney Smith's blistering comment in 1820 illustrates the typical prejudice against American culture: "In the four quarters of the globe, who reads an American Book? or goes to an American play? or looks at an American

picture or statue?" (Smith 79). Under such circumstances, the praise accorded by critics for Irving's writings was an extraordinary achievement. William Godwin praises Irving's "elegance and refinement," which he was not "exactly prepared to look for in America" (P. Irving 245-6).

The commendation from critics, however, is not always unanimous. In *The Spirit of the Age*, William Hazlitt introduces Charles Lamb and Irving in the same section. Hazlitt's choice of personages appears appropriate, for both Lamb's and Irving's attentions are directed not to the present state of England, but to its appearance in the past. Compared with an enthusiastic approbation of Lamb's style in describing "the manners of the last age," Hazlitt's appreciation of Irving takes on a tinge of irony:

> Instead of looking round to see what we are, he sets to work to describe us as we were — at second hand.... Instead of tracing the changes that have taken place in society since Addison or Fielding wrote, he transcribes their account in a different handwriting, and thus keeps us stationary, at least in our most attractive and praise-worthy qualities of simplicity, honesty, hospitality, modesty and good-nature. This is a very flattering mode of turning fiction into history or history into fiction... (Hazlitt 270).

In the next paragraph, Hazlitt goes on to say that Irving's style is "one way of complementing our national and Tory prejudices." It is true that *The Sketch-Book* became "the amusement of the general reader." For a great literary connoisseur like Hazlitt, however, Irving's anachronistic praise for the antiquity in England, which must have sounded comforting in the age of turbulence after the Napoleonic Wars, appears like a wily strategy for acquiring the British reader's interest.

Nevertheless, it is too early to conclude that Irving was merely fawning over the British conservatives. As he reflects in the preface to the revised edition of the book in 1848, *The Sketch-Book* was not aimed at English readership, since the problems of copyrighting used to prevent American writers from gaining a large profit from their works in England. Assuming the American reader, Irving should have thought what themes would be striking for his fellow countrymen. To argue Irving's attitude in *The Sketch-Book*, it is necessary to bear in mind that the narrator is a traveller from America, which has not yet acquired a national identity to be proud of. In this paper, I would like to discuss Irving's excessive idealisation of England *in The Sketch-Book*, and the narrator's wilful assimilation into its fantasy, and then observe

curious similarities between Native Americans and the Squire Bracebridge. Focusing on Irving's consciousness as an American will reveal the motivation for his enthusiastic praise of English tradition.

II Irving as a "Ready Believer": His Willing Indulgence into Fancy

In the opening piece of *The Sketch-Book*, Irving explains the motive for his journey to England in detail:

> My native country was full of youthful promise: Europe was rich in the accumulated treasures of age. Her very ruins told the history of times gone by, and every mouldering stone was a chronicle. I longed to wander over the scenes of renowned achievement — to tread, as it were, in the footsteps of antiquity — to loiter about the ruined castle — to meditate on the falling tower — to escape, in short, from the common-place realities of the present, and lose myself among the shadowy grandeurs of the past (12).

The contrast between "ruins told the history of times gone by" and "the common-place realities of the present" clearly indicates the difference between England and America, and Irving's fascination with the former. What Irving seeks for in his journey is not an industrialised and urbanised society, but the old national character, which he finds lacking in America.

In fact, Irving's visit to England, particularly his journey to rural villages, never betrays his expectation. Every description of British country life is filled with his pleasure in observing the well-preserved old customs: "[C]ommon features of English landscape evince a calm and settled security, and hereditary transmission of homebred virtues and local attachments, that speak deeply and touchingly for the moral character of the nation" (63). In front of the sepulchres of literary giants in Westminster Abbey as well, Irving experiences a "new, active, and immediate" link between the past and himself, because "treasures of wisdom, bright gems of thought, and golden veins of language" (150-1) left to their posterity make a visitor feel akin to the writers in the past. A consciousness that the inheritance of ancestry has been surely handed down looks 'novel' in the eyes of a young republican.

The inheritance from the past also contributes to the stability of a community. In "The Country Church," Irving describes a church whose congregation consists of every kind of class,

from ancient aristocrats to humble peasants. Nothing rejoices him more than the noblemen's frankness to the farmers. Instead of evoking feud between classes, the feudal system works well in the rural village: "The young ladies would stop and converse in the kindest manner with the peasantry, caress the children, and listen to the stories of the humble cottagers.... I was pleased to see the manner in which they [gentlemen] would converse with the peasantry about those rural concerns and field-sports" (89). Without sensing haughtiness on the part of the aristocracy, and servility from the peasants, the narrator finds that a harmonious atmosphere pervades the church. Moreover, an elderly gentleman, who joins in loudly in the service, is introduced as an "example to the lower orders" (92). He thinks of the enlightenment of the lower class as his noble obligation, and believes that propagation of his belief will nurture the solidity of the nation. Irving presents the feudal system as the idealistic form for a country by emphasizing the trickle-down of good influence from the powerful members of the society.

In observing antiquity in England, Irving develops his analysis on the personality of the Englishman further in "John Bull." John Bull, a typical person in Britain, is a straightforward, affectionate fellow who "thinks not merely for himself and family, but for all the country round, and is most generously disposed to be every body's champion" (266-7). Moreover, he considers it his duty to preserve the inheritance from his ancestors as it is. His manor-house is "a vast accumulation of parts" (268), which were added to the original edifice from time to time by his ancestors. The idea of renovation never occurs to him, since he "has such a reverence for every thing that has been long in the family, that he will not hear even of abuses being reformed, because they are good old family abuses" (271). According to Irving, such a personality as that of John Bull, which was first a mere product of imagination portraited in caricature, had gradually adapted itself to the mind of Englishmen, and became the general character of English people. As well as customs in a community, the disposition of English people has been created over a long span of time. Thus, as he expects, Irving finds in England a close link with the past in terms of the customs and the frame of mind of the subjects. Returning to his account of himself, Irving notes that Europe has "the charms of storied and poetical association" (12), which indicates that he has already visualised his image of England beforehand by accumulating knowledge from books. His travel is not a sensational adventure of *terra incognita*. What he seeks for is a confirmation that things really exist the way he learnsed about them in books.

It is this link between the past and the present found by Irving in his journey that distinguishes his sketches from Lamb's *Elia*. Elia's depiction of London in bygone days

tends to be filled with his lamentation over its disappearance. Elia's sentimental visit to The South-Sea House, his workplace in his youth, serves as an example of the narrator's fundamental attitude. When the House was full of energy, it was "a magnificent relic" whose grand ornaments told much of its glorious history, and such an atmosphere had descended at least to Elia's generation. Fifty years later, however, silence pervades the place, which is totally different from "the fret and fever of speculation — with Bank, and 'Change, and India-house" around it (Lamb 2). Severance of the past and present is illustrated all the more for the adjacency of these places. An artificial fountain in the Inner Temple, which was a symbol of Elia's happy childhood, is also reported to be "dried up, or bickered over" (Lamb 96). In an essay on Westminster Abbey, he argues that a chance of nurturing the "antiquarian spirit" (Lamb 235) had been deprived because of the entrance fee, which was not collected in his younger days. Lamb's and Irving's contrasting reactions to the remaining traces of the good old days reveal Irving's optimistic view toward the preservation of the pastoral English of the past.

Irving, however, is not unaware of the arrival of the tide of the day, that is, the gradual change in the appearance of the country. In the sketch of Little Britain, a quarter located in the centre of London, Irving first describes the place as one where old Englishness is condensed: "Little Britain may truly be called the heart's core of the city; the strong-hold of true John Bullism. It is a fragment of London as it was in its better days, with its antiquated folks and fashions. Here flourish in great preservation many of the holiday games and customs of yore" (213). Irving chronologically relates the history of Little Britain, and the relics let Irving meditate on the days of prosperity in this quarter. The old customs and the disposition of John Bullism are still preserved by the present inhabitants, which creates snugness in this place.

To Irving's regret, however, a modern Arcadia cannot escape from a flux of modernisation. In the latter half of the sketch, Irving reports that the emergence of the butcher's family, having suddenly acquired a large fortune, becomes a trigger of threatening 'innovation' of the quarter:

> [T]hey were immediately smitten with a passion for high life; set up a one-horse carriage, put a bit of gold lace round the errand boy's hat, and have been the talk and detestation of the whole neighborhood ever since.... [T]hey could endure no dance but quadrilles, which nobody had ever heard of in Little Britain; and they took to reading novels, talking bad French, and playing upon the piano. Their brother... set up for a

dandy and a critic, characters hitherto unknown in these parts... (220).

Although their neighbours indignantly denounce the snobbery of the butcher's family at first, they are gradually infected with their snobbish tastes, and begin to follow their example by letting their daughters take lessons of quadrilles and by wearing bonnets in the streets. Feeling the danger of "the total downfall of genuine John Bullism" (223), Irving decides to leave Little Britain. Unlike other pieces, the portrait of this historical place ends with Irving's grief over the 'innovation' of English character. Little Britain is depicted as what Malcolm Andrews calls "a microcosm of Great Britain, where one can study the changing culture of the nation" (Andrews 8).

The influence of the modern spirit on the old-fashioned community can also be found in the countryside. While John Bull preserves his mansion as it is, squandering on its maintenance frequently leads him to financial problems, and his children advise him to mend his extravagancy from a modern, practical point of view. Irving also makes a sad prediction about his manor-house at the end of the sketch: "I should almost tremble to see it meddled with, during the present conflict with tastes and opinions.... [M]any [of his advisers], I fear, are mere levelers, who, when they had once got to work with their mattocks on this venerable edifice, would never stop until they had brought it to the ground, and perhaps buried themselves among the ruins" (274). The poetic and picturesque nature of the manor-house is the very element that attracts Irving. At the same time, he is forced to encounter and engage with the signs of its impeding disappearance during his journey.

Nevertheless, Irving seems to persist in the illusion that England retains its old-fashioned nature, for he is willing to suspend disbelief, and his attention is fundamentally focused on the remnants from the past. In fact, Irving does not leave Little Britain with an acute disappointment at the metropolis, and his journey goes on in search of "some other nest in this great city, where old English manners are still kept up" (223). Certainly, due to the threatening prevalence of a modern sense of values, he is faced with "the common-sense reality" also in England, but he still wants to present England as a country founded on the great tradition.

Irving's adherence to this general principle can be seen conspicuously in "London Antiques." In it, he comes across the "relics of a 'foregone world' locked up in the heart of the city" after wandering through "dull monotonous streets" (208). The phrase "locked up" indicates that this place is completely protected from the influence of the mundane world. His imagination is stimulated when he encounters a procession of old men in long black cloaks in the gothic

edifice:

> I was singularly struck with their appearance; their black cloaks and antiquated air comported with the style of this most venerable and mysterious pile. It was as if the ghosts of the departed years, about which I had been musing, were passing in review before me. Pleasing myself with such fancies, I set out, in the spirit of romance, to explore what I pictured to myself a realm of shadows, existing in the very centre of substantial realities (209).

Surrounded by the strange and uncouth objects in the room such as the bottled serpents and the demonic idols decorated on the mantelpiece, Irving comes to believe that they must be professors of the black art. Although they later turn out to be the pensioners returning from morning service, and the man who looked like a necromancer is a collector of old curiosities, the boundary between the imaginary and the real is surprisingly blurred.

In his visit to Stratford-on-Avon, Irving leaps to the imaginary world developed in his mind. In Shakespeare's house, he is shown the chair on which Shakespeare used to sit. Although its authenticity appears highly doubtful, Irving believes that the inspiration of the Bard must have been cultivated on this chair. Irving asserts that it is this credulity that is necessary during one's travel:

> I am always of easy faith in such matters, and am ever willing to be deceived, where the deceit is pleasant and costs nothing. I am therefore a ready believer in relics, legends, and local anecdotes of goblins and great men; and would advise all travellers who travel for their gratification to be the same. What is it to us, whether these stories be true or false, so long as we can persuade ourselves into the belief of them, and enjoy all the charm of the reality? (226).

Irving, the "ready believer," does not care about the authenticity of the things he observes. Of course, his rational judgement checks him, since he has to "persuade" himself to be immersed in the illusion. Whenever the fancy amuses him, however, he discards the accuracy of his writings.

Such wilful assimilation into the fancy is a conspicuous feature of Irving's writing. With this attitude, he reacts to the signs of the old society's disappearance. As discussed above, Irving seeks the 'otherness,' that is, a matured society based on the great tradition and

history in his trip to England. To his dismay, however, the trend of the day, which severs the link between the past and the present, begins to change the aspect of the whole country. Still, the "ready believer" sticks to his initial belief and decorates sober reality with the help of his imagination. Thus, Irving does not depict England in a literal sense. Rather, he continually presents an idealised version of the country.

III Sticking to Tradition: The Indian Tribes and the Squire Bracebridge

In this section, I would like to argue for Irving's urge to the conservative representation of England. From a biographical point of view, Jefferey Rubin-Dorsky claims that Irving's attachment to the past in this book is closely related to the tragedy in his personal life. While writing *The Sketch-Book*, Irving was suffering from the recurrence of the shock he had experienced when his fiancée died in 1809. Moreover, the collapse of the family business threatened him to impoverishment. Rubin-Dorsky surmises that the emotional and financial strain influences Irving's perspective: "Grief implanted in Irving a strong recognition of the essential separateness of the world and the self" (Rubin-Dorsky 241). It seems natural that Irving's current situation drives him to an aspiration to the past. Of course, the significance of his personal circumstances cannot be overlooked. Yet, Irving's viewpoint as an American, I think, should also be reconsidered to understand what underlies his pursuit of English antiquity. On Irving's pastoralisation of English scenery, Simon P. Hull observes that "the blithe indulgence of fancy" sounds ironical due to the "undercutting allusion" to "darker, morally and politically complex realities" (Hull 171). Revealing the infusion of "darker realities" into the pastoral society, however, does not seem to be Irving's main purpose. Rather, his sense of rootlessness as an American reflects his yearning for England as an ideal country.

In *The Sketch-Book*, the number of writings on America is rather small, so the studies of his own country in "Traits of Indian Character" and "Philip of Pokanoket" can be regarded as Irving's exceptional attempt in this book. According to Stanley T. Williams, Irving's biographer, these two essays were originally written for the *Analectic* six years before the publication of *The Sketch-Book*. As to these writings, Williams comments that they are just "fillers rather than integral parts of *The Sketch-Book*" (Williams 183). Certainly, their bookish tendency in these essays seems to make them look like a tedious history book, but it is unlikely that Irving picked them up indiscriminately for the publication of the book. By

comparing these essays with a series of essays on the narrator's stay in Bracebridge Hall, a historic manor-house in England, curious similarities can be detected between them, and that reveals that Irving's viewpoint as an American is reflected throughout the book.

Let us first probe into Irving's view on Native Americans. In these two essays, he frequently refers to the historical books by New Englanders, in which they boast of their triumph over the savage pagan. Lamenting the prevalence of such prejudice against the Indian tribes, he asserts the falsehood of their general impression:

> The current opinion of the Indian character, however, is too apt to be formed from the miserable hordes which infest the frontiers, and hang on the skirts of the settlements. These are too commonly composed of degenerate beings, corrupted and enfeebled by the vices of society, without being benefited by its civilization. That proud independence, which formed the main pillar of savage virtue, has been shaken down, and the whole moral fabric lies in ruins (241).

In Irving's view, it is the infection of Western civilisation that corrupted their "savage virtue." Driven by their own desire, they become dissipated and thievish. Their ancestors, however, are significantly different. Although they looked like "beasts of the forest" (240) for the early colonists, they had a profound reverence for their ancestors and were devoted to the tradition passed on to them. In fact, Irving reports that they never fail to pay reverence at the tombs of their kindred and used to protect the sepulchres at any cost from the planters of Plymouth. Irving's indignation is directed to the New Englander's arrogance which trampled down American culture.

Irving's study on the history of his country continues in "Philip of Pokanoket," in which he describes the detailed tale of the conflict between Native Americans and the early settlers. Throughout the essay, Philip, the sachem of the tribe, is portrayed as a humane character who has "softer feelings of connubial love and paternal tenderness," and "the generous sentiment of friendship" (263). On the other hand, Irving stresses the inhumanity of the white men, and narrates how cruelly they set fire to the fort of the Indian tribe and how painfully the desperate cry of their children resounded. Although a contemporary book records the cruelty of Native Americans to the settlers, Irving strongly objects to such writings. In the closing paragraph of the essay, Philip's lifelong resistance to the white men is analysed as follows:

> He was a patriot attached to his native soil — a prince true to his subjects, and indignant of their wrongs.... Proud of heart, and with an untamable love of natural liberty, he preferred to enjoy it among the beasts of the forests or in the dismal and famished recesses of swamps and morasses, rather than bow his haughty spirit to submission, and live dependent and despised in the ease and luxury of the settlements (264).

Believing the conquest of the land and its natives as a part of their mission as Christians, the white men force the Indian tribes to submit to their virtue. Philip's war against the white men is his resistance to the Western civilisation. Irving characterises him as the hero who keeps his "haughty spirit" to the end.

Irving's passionate vindication of Native Americans has much to do with his attachment to the England of the past. In the middle of his stay in England, the narrator is asked to spend the Christmas holidays in the manor-house with his friend Frank Bracebridge, who happens to be the narrator's fellow passenger. Everything in Bracebridge Hall amuses the narrator, for the landlord of the Hall is the very personification of the elements Irving has praised in his journey. Like the mansion described in "John Bull," the Hall is an "irregular" buildings consisted of "the architecture of different periods" (175), which reflects the landlord's respect for his ancestors. Like the aristocracy in "The Country Church," he enjoys mingling with the peasants, and invites them to the Hall on Christmas Day. Consulting "old books for precedent and authority for every "merrie disport"" (175), he makes his children play the old English games according to the original form, and encourages the peasants in his estate to do the same, for he believes that the old games and local customs have a "great effect in making the peasant fond of his home and the promotion of them by the gentry [makes] him fond of his lord" (192). The belief that sustaining the tradition will lead to the stability of a community resonates closely with Irving's ideas. Under the roof of Bracebridge Hall, the narrator finally finds his idealised place.

Nevertheless, the landlord's fondness for the antiquarian style of life does not originate from his total ignorance of the footsteps of the new age. He grumbles to the narrator about the tendency of today's peasantry:

> 'The nation,' continued he, 'is altered; we have almost lost our simple true-hearted peasantry. They have broken asunder from the higher classes, and seem to think their interests are separate. They have become too knowing, and begin to read

newspapers, listen to ale-house politicians, and talk of reform (192).

The influence of egalitarianism has already extended even to the harmonious community in the landlord's estate. Those who begin to seek out the pursuit of their own interests might think that they had been exploited, which will lead to the denial of the order that has sustained the community. The spirit of the modern age thus surely influences the estate. Besides, the Hall and the estate have, in fact, not kept the customs from the former generations. When promoting the entertainments and the customs to his family and the peasants, the Squire looks up the books about the old manners, which indicates that they have actually died out in the community. Moreover, the Christmas dinner, which is reported to be conducted strictly in the old-fashioned manner looks like a scene in a play, since the attendants "versed" well in their parts as a result of "many a rehearsal" (198). It is true that the old customs no longer survive naturally in his estate. With the power of fancy, however, the Squire Bracebridge creates an artificial Eden, sticking to antiquity. The landlord's extraordinary persistence in antiquity is a desperate resistance to modernisation.

Viewed in this light, there are similarities between Philip of Pokanoket and the Squire Bracebridge. The Indian tribes fought against Western civilisation to preserve their territory. Likewise, the landlord attempts to revive the old-fashioned community to avoid being swallowed up by the modern age. In "Philip of Pokanoket," Irving compares the civilisation to a lawn, where "every roughness is smoothed, every bramble eradicated, and where the eye is delighted by the smiling verdure of a velvet surface" (250-1). Similar to mowing a lawn, the early American settlers made the Indian tribes conform to their sense of values, following the Christian spirit. The same is true of the modern spirit in Irving's day, in that it pushes forward standardisation in the appearance of the country and spares no room for diversity. In this sense, Irving's study on civilisation in "Philip of Pokanoket" can also be applied to the sketches of Bracebridge Hall. Considering their resistant attitude toward the standardising tendency of their days, it seems that the essays of the Native Americans cannot be considered as mere "fillers" in the book. They convey to the reader Irving's attachment to antiquity and disruptive powers of civilisation, which is an underlying trace in all his sketches of England. The Squire Bracebridge is represented as the counterpart of Philip in America.

Returning to the general manifesto of the book, Irving writes that a wish to see the "gigantic race" from which he has "degenerated" (12) drives him to England. His sense of inferiority in relation to the British people does not spring only from the immaturity of his own country. Young as it is as a nation, America saw the devastation of the culture of Native American.

In a sense, America precedes England in weeding out the elements of the old world. The consciousness that the chain of the link which unites him to the past has been broken in his country strengthens his aspiration for England all the more. For him, England should be the country which preserves the traces of the old world. Therefore, Irving does not bring to life the antiquarian scenery and convention in England as the national identity to tickle the English reader's pride in them. It is Irving's sense of rootlessness as an American that makes him stay with the traces of antiquity and decorate the sober reality with his fancy, even when he sees the social and cultural changes overtaking the traditional society.

Ⅳ　Conclusion

After completing *The Sketch-Book*, Irving wrote *Bracebridge Hall*, in which the life and customs in the Hall and its inhabitants are described further. Whereas the antiquarian spirit preserved by the Squire Bracebridge attracts the narrator, he foresees at the same time that the pastoral scenery in the estate will disappear some day: "the good Squire, and all his peculiarities, will be buried in the neighboring church. The old Hall will be modernized into a fashionable country-seat, or, peradventure, a manufactory" (Irving *Bracebridge* 458). As has already been observed, the landlord establishes his artificial Eden while recognising the approaching footsteps of the new order. In this respect, his effort is the same as Irving's, in that both of them wilfully assimilate themselves into their fancies. There is, however, a difference between them. At the end of the essay on the Indian tribes, he mentions the possibility of their subsistence in the memory of the later generations: "If, perchance, some dubious memorial of them should survive, it may be in the romantic dreams of the poet" (249). The act of writing enables what will be forgotten to stay preserved in the reader's mind. By ideally presenting the English society based on its great tradition, Irving preserves its beauty, though it might be lost in the near future. He not only amuses the American reader with the 'otherness' of England, but also enlightens his rootless countryman by laying emphasis on the importance of reverence for the past.

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