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Displaced Representation and Nationalistic Appropriation: Illustrating the Atlantic Cable of 1858

The Atlantic Cable of 1858 was one of the greatest technological feats of the mid-nineteenth century¹. Making use of the relatively new invention of telegraphy², it provided North America and Europe with an almost instantaneous communications link, at a time when sailing vessels could still take two or even three weeks to cross the Atlantic Ocean and when even the relatively new ocean-going steamships required over ten days to make the crossing. If, in the end, the Atlantic Cable of 1858 only operated for a few weeks before the signal began to fade, and finally failed, its initial success proved that such a bold and world-changing project was, in fact, possible³

¹ Other candidates for such a distinction might include the Thames Tunnel (1843), the SS *Great Eastern* (1858) (by far the largest steamship of the time), the first American transcontinental railroad (1869) or the Suez Canal (1869), but none of these technological wonders (impressive as they are), I would argue, are of the same class since none of them represented such a large scale application of such a so recently invented and so fundamentally innovative technology.

² The first patent for a telegraphic device was issued in England in June 1837 to William Fothergill Cook and Charles Wheatstone, just a few months before Samuel F. B. Morse filed for a patent in the United States. The first successful telegraph line was strung between Baltimore and Washington, D.C. in 1844, and the first submarine telegraph cable was laid between Dover and Calais in 1850.

³ The link was completed on August 5, 1858, and messages were successfully sent back and forth across the Atlantic for several weeks. However, by the end of the month, the signal began to fade and become irregular; by early September, clear messages were no longer able to

Linking New York to London, and thus the New World to the Old, the most audacious part of the project was the single stretch of cable—between Valentia Bay, Ireland, and Trinity Bay, Newfoundland—of 1,950 miles, almost five times the length of the cable laid in the Black Sea in 1855, which had previously been the longest submarine telegraph cable in the world.

The success of the Atlantic Cable project was primarily due to the work of American entrepreneur Cyrus W. Field, who before becoming involved in the project had made a fortune in paper manufacturing. After meeting with English-born Canadian Frederick N. Gisborne—whose failed company had planned to build a rapid communications link between North America and Europe using a combination of a new telegraph line between Newfoundland and mainland Canada and fast steamships plying between Newfoundland and Ireland, where they would transfer messages back and forth via a telegraph station on the western Irish coast—Field was taken with the idea of connecting the two continents with a direct telegraphic link across the Atlantic. Having consulted with Samuel F. B. Morse, who confirmed the practicality of a transatlantic telegraph cable through experimentation, and who himself became associated with the Atlantic Cable project, Field began serious work on getting the huge project underway. And huge it was. At the time, there wasn't a single ship in the world capable of carrying the weight of the entire length of the cable, so it was decided to use two, one American and one British, each with half of the cable on board. The plan was to have the ships rendezvous in

be sent. After October 20, the cable remained dead. The possibility of such a connection, however, had been demonstrated. A new cable was finally laid in 1866, just after the end of the American Civil War, and established a permanent telegraphic link between America and Europe. Two contemporary works, whose illustrations will be examined in this article, provide useful and interesting accounts of the project: Charles F. Briggs and Augustus Maverick, *The Story of the Telegraph, and A History of the Great Atlantic Cable*, New York: Rudd & Carleton, 1858, and John Mullaly, *The Laying of the Cable, or The Ocean Telegraph*, New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1858. For a good, brief description published a year after the Atlantic Cable centennial, see Bern Dibner, *The Atlantic Cable*, Norwalk, Connecticut: Burndy Library, 1959. Two more recent accounts include John Steele Gordon, *A Thread Across the Ocean: The Heroic Story of the Transatlantic Cable*, New York: Walker & Company, 2002, and Chester G. Hearn, *Circuits in the Sea: The Men, the Ships, and the Atlantic Cable*, Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2004.

the mid-Atlantic, splice their halves of the cable together and then sail off in opposite directions, paying out cable as they made their separate ways to Newfoundland and Ireland.

The first attempt to lay the Atlantic Cable took place in the summer of 1857, but after repeated breaks, due primarily to imperfect paying-out machinery, the project was abandoned until the following summer. Once again, there were setbacks, but on August 5, 1858, the two ends were landed on the opposite shores and the link between the two continents was complete. By August 10, intelligible words were being transmitted, and an exploit that had, for many, seemed an impossible dream or a madman's folly had been realized. Indeed, at the time, the Atlantic Cable seemed nothing short of a miracle, comparable, it would seem, to the first landing of a man on the moon just a little over a century later. And the event led to an outpouring of enthusiasm and major celebrations, notably in New York City, but also across the entire United States, and, indeed, around the world⁴. Just one of the highlights was when Queen Victoria sent a message of congratulations to U.S. President James Buchanan, who duly responded in kind, an exchange that set off a second round of spontaneous festivities, before official celebrations were held in a large number of American cities on September first. An excerpt from an article that appeared in the September issue of the *United States Democratic Review* gives an idea of just how miraculous this achievement seemed at the time. Indeed, even allowing for nineteenth-century rhetorical extravagance, this passage nonetheless reflects the feeling at the time that something indeed exceptional had been accomplished:

⁴ For a general description and analysis of the celebrations and, more specifically, of one of the more remarkable manifestations of this enthusiasm, an outpouring of popular poetry about the cable, see my articles: "The Transatlantic Cable in Popular Poetry," *Technology and the American Imagination: An Ongoing Challenge*, eds. Francesca Bisutti De Riz and Rosella Mamoli Zorzi, Venice: Supernova, 1994, pp. 227-236, and "Excess and Irony in Transatlantic Cable Poetry," *GRAAT* 15 (1996), pp. 109-120.

An enterprise has just been consummated, so profound in conception, grand in execution, and stupendous in its promised results to mankind, as to confound by its awful magnitude the most daring imagination, and baffle momentarily, like some miraculous phenomenon or supernatural symbol, the analysis and comprehension of the world.

The marvelous conquests of science in the total subordination of matter to mind, are not unknown or unrecorded in the annals of past invention and discovery. Our own country presents the most remarkable evidences of intellectual and scientific progression; every page of American history is illumined by the great and magnificent deeds of her people, in the varied channels of human ingenuity and effort. But no event wrought in this land, or any other, of ancient or modern times, has so convulsed and electrified the public mind and heart as the intelligence of the success of the Atlantic Telegraph. Lightning responds to lightning, and everywhere, in all languages and every tongue, is heralded, beyond the rapidity of thought, the sublime tidings that man, under the benediction and inspiration of the Almighty, has finally *mastered the sea*. The spontaneous and mighty visible demonstrations it has evoked, but faintly characterize the deep, electric, and silent thrill it has sent through millions of hearts. This last and greatest triumph has signaled a new era—marked another epoch in the history of the world⁵.

Displaced Representation

Two books that were published almost immediately after the completion of the cable as well as many of the contemporary newspapers and magazines included not only accounts of, or sometimes poems inspired by, the exploit and the celebrations, but also illustrations. These images highlight technical points or themes included in the writings and sometimes provide additional information or suggest other themes. Providing images of something as simple (and as potentially visually uninteresting) as a cable, however, did present certain problems or at least indirectly raise certain questions about how to illustrate the project. These questions ended up being answered in various forms, but, in one way or another, many of the illustrations that appeared at the time incorporated “displacement strategies” in which things other than the cable itself are presented or highlighted (though the cable does feature in many of the contemporary illustrations).

⁵ “Cyrus W. Field,” *United States Democratic Review* (September 1858), p. 241.

I would like to begin a consideration of this topic with the two books on the Atlantic Cable that were published soon after the completion of the link. These works—which were aimed at the general public and provide interesting nineteenth-century examples of the “instant book”—are especially worthy of note in the context of this study since they both include multiple illustrations and encapsulate, to a certain extent, some of the answers to the question of how to illustrate the Atlantic Cable for a popular audience. The first one I will consider is *The Story of the Telegraph, and A History of the Great Atlantic Cable* by Charles F. Briggs and Augustus Maverick. Though the book is described on the title page as “Abundantly and Beautifully Illustrated,” that turns out to seem like a bit of false advertising since, in fact, only thirteen pages (including the frontispiece) of this 255-page book include illustrations, and some of those are rather small, taking up only a small part of the page. This fact may, in part, reflect the difficulty of putting out an illustrated book in such a short amount of time, but it also seems to highlight the difficulty some writers and publishers may have had in imagining just how to go about illustrating something as banal in appearance as a cable. In any case, the book’s frontispiece, an engraving by John A. O’Neill of a portrait of Cyrus W. Field, offers a first example of a displacement strategy as it focuses on the man behind the project, rather than the cable itself (**fig. 1**). And book’s title page, facing the frontispiece, gives a few additional hints as to what other sorts of displacement strategies would be used within that work and, indeed, elsewhere. The long subtitle, for example, lists some of the many topics related to the Atlantic Cable that would be described, and sometimes illustrated, in the book, and the quotation from Psalms at the top of the page (“Their line is gone out through all the earth, / And their words to the end of the world.” [chap. 19, ver. 4]) reflects the religious themes that appear in some of the illustrations in the popular press (though not in the illustrations of the book itself). Another example in Briggs and Maverick’s work of a displacement strategy is offered in the fold-out color map included with the work, which shows where the cable

was laid (**fig. 2**). But in this case, the publisher also includes an image of a piece of the cable itself (both a cross section and side view) in the lower left-hand corner.

The illustrations within the book proper are relatively simplistic, and, once again, often focus on things other than the Atlantic Cable itself. The first ones are a set of three that show various telegraphic apparatuses (**fig. 3**). But cables do finally make their first appearance on pages 32 and 33, though, at this point, as part of a build-up to the Atlantic Cable itself. The examples on these pages, in fact, are from a land telegraph and a cable used for river crossings (**fig. 4**). The next step in the progression includes representations of two submarine cables, the one used for the Dover-Calais connection (1850) and the one used for the link between Holyhead, Wales, and Howth, Ireland (1852) (**fig. 5**). Finally, the suspense having gone on long enough, the reader is treated to images of a cross section, profile view and cutaway sectional view of the Atlantic Cable itself on pages 62 and 63 (**fig. 6**). These are followed by an illustration of the splicing technique used to join the various separate lengths of the Atlantic Cable together (**fig. 7**) and an image of a cross section of the shore end of the cable (which was thicker than the rest of the cable since it needed to withstand the stress caused by the movement of waves and tides) (**fig. 8**). And those two illustrations are the last ones in the book. But if there was a difficulty in illustrating something like the Atlantic Cable, one question that arises is whether an illustration of something actually has to be an image. A “Table of Submarine Cables,” included in the Appendix of *The Story of the Telegraph, and A History of the Great Atlantic Cable*, can be seen, for example, as illustrating the significance of this technological exploit merely through a list of names, dates and lengths in miles of all the submarine cables laid up until that time (**fig. 9**). The last entry on the list, for the Atlantic Cable, with its number of miles (1,950) far outstripping all the others, subtly but eloquently illustrates the fact that the Atlantic Cable was in a class by itself.

The second “instant book” on the topic was *The Laying of the Telegraphic Cable* by John Mullaly, who billed himself on the title page as the “Historian of the Enterprise.” Mullaly, in fact, was on board the American ship *Niagara*, one of the two vessels used in laying the cable, and was a special correspondent for the New York *Herald*. The book was printed on a lower quality paper than the work by Briggs and Maverick and was sold bound in paper covers, which no doubt reflects the attempt to get it on sale as quickly as possible and for the relatively cheap price of fifty cents. Mullaly’s book includes some of the same kinds of illustrations as Briggs and Maverick’s, but it also goes much further in finding alternative, and sometimes more attractive, ways of illustrating the cable project, as did the newspapers and magazines of the time. I’ll first take a brief look at some of the similarities between the two “instant books” and then shift my focus to thematic considerations of Atlantic Cable illustrations that will include both *The Laying of the Telegraphic Cable* and periodicals. One of the similarities between the two books is the inclusion of a map of the Atlantic Cable span (**fig. 10**). Once again, this approach proved a relatively dramatic way of displaying the grandeur of the project, here without any attempt to include an illustration of the cable itself. Mullaly’s work also includes illustrations of telegraphic apparatuses and the machinery used in laying the cable (**figs 11 & 12**), highlighting, as had Briggs and Maverick, all of the somewhat complicated technology that had helped lead to making the Atlantic Cable a possibility, and then a reality. And then, of course, *The Laying of the Telegraphic Cable* also includes illustrations of the Atlantic Cable itself (**fig. 13**).

While on the topic of illustrations of the cable itself, I’d like to shift away from print for a moment, to take a brief look at one unique angle on the question of illustrating the cable that was implicitly offered by Tiffany’s & Co., the famed New York jeweler, which decided to cash in on public interest in the project by offering not some sort of deluxe image of the cable, but instead the “real thing,” as it were. In fact, Tiffany’s sold souvenir pieces of the actual cable (or rather four-inch segments of what was left over after the laying of the

cable was complete) for fifty cents (the same price as Mullaly’s book), which were wrapped with a brass band inscribed: “ATLANTIC TELEGRAPH CABLE / GUARANTEED BY TIFFANY & CO. / BROADWAY • NEW YORK • 1858” and accompanied by a printed certificate signed by Cyrus W. Field (figs 14 & 15). Both texts (on the band and on the certificate) serve to authenticate this “piece of history.” Thus continuing in the vein of focusing on the cable itself—it’s the least one could say in this case—this example of what amounts to a literal synecdoche raises the question, at least potentially, as to whether something can be an illustration of itself.

In any case, the often relatively basic, sometimes literalistic, sometimes exceedingly technical, not to say (anachronistically and somewhat informally) geeky, approaches to illustrating the cable reviewed thus far were employed by the popular press in newspapers and magazines as well. The widely distributed New York-based *Harper’s Weekly*, for example, reproduced technical drawings of an overhead view of the paying-out machine and a side view of the brake machinery and drums for paying out the cable (figs 16 & 17) as well as representations of the ocean floor, showing the relatively flat surface of the so-called “telegraph plateau” running east-west and the much more rugged and uneven surface of the ocean floor on its north-south axis (figs 18 & 19). The newspapers and magazines and Mullaly, however, also tried to humanize even the more technical aspects the Atlantic Cable by including people in their illustrations alongside, or even interacting with, the machinery or the cable itself. One illustration from another major New York weekly, *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper*, for example, shows men on board the *Niagara* supervising the paying out of the cable from one of the large coils carried within the hold, and another, from a later issue of the same newspaper, shows the operators’ room, from which telegraphers maintained contact between the two ships during the voyage, and includes other men also supervising the cable as it is pulled from one of the coils (figs 20 & 21). The illustration of a similar scene in Mullaly’s book is somewhat less professionally drawn and is almost

cartoonish in its depiction of men in the process of coiling a length of cable in preparation for paying it out (fig. 22). In any case, the image certainly succeeds in giving a human face to the project in a way that the illustrations of the cable itself or the various apparatuses and machinery related to the history and the laying of the cable alone do not.

In a further remove from illustrating the cable itself or the more technical aspects of the enterprise, the popular press frequently portrayed the two ships that laid the cable, the American *Niagara* and the British *Agamemnon*, and the site of the two endpoints of the cable, Trinity Bay, Newfoundland, and Valentia Bay, Ireland, in ways that emphasize the grandeur of the enterprise, and which frequently don't include the cable itself at all. A full-page illustration dominated by the two ships that appeared in *Harper's Weekly*—indeed, in the case of the *Niagara* its mast extending beyond the upper frame of the image—gives an idea of an attempt to confer an aura of magnificence on the project (fig. 23). The illustrations focusing on the endpoints the cable, however, employ a somewhat different, even opposite, strategy, and—while still celebrating the human exploit, and notably the role of the various ships in the “telegraph squadron” (other ships accompanied the *Niagara* and the *Agamemnon*, though they were not directly involved in the laying of the cable)—often highlight the sublimity and grandeur of Nature in comparison to the ships and men on shore there to greet them (figs 24 & 25). These illustrations thus seem to magnify the achievement by showing the immensity of Nature that the successful completion of the Atlantic Cable had, to a certain extent, tamed or overcome while, at the same time, implying that this new technology had a natural place amidst Nature. This latter point of view is especially strongly suggested in an illustration of the telegraph station on the American terminus of the cable that appeared in *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* (fig. 26). Here, the clapboard telegraph station, with a small plume of smoke gently rising out of its chimney, resembles a well-kept farmhouse nestled in a bucolic setting, complete with trees, fields, a quiet stream and even cows, one of which

is being milked. The men who apparently have something to do with the telegraph itself are all in the background, dwarfed, to a large extent, by the expanse of Nature, and, furthermore, do not seem to be in any way disturbing the pastoral bliss. This presentation, in fact, offers a reversal of the archetypical image of the intrusion of “the machine in the garden” identified by Leo Marx, in which an account (here a visual illustration) of “the pleasures of withdrawal from the world—a simple pleasure fantasy—is transformed by the interruption of the machine into a far more complex state of mind.”⁶ Granted, a telegraph wire and station provide a much less dramatic and less violent interruption of the pastoral scene than the archetypical examples of technology in mid-nineteenth-century America, the steam locomotive or Mississippi riverboat. The intrusion, however, is nonetheless present, and the illustration clearly offers the message that the Atlantic Cable will not disrupt the natural scene or, for that matter, the natural balance of life.

Other strategies of illustrating the Atlantic Cable were much more symbolic and stressed, for example, the positive effect that the improved communication provided by the new link would supposedly have. Indeed, many people at the time thought that the ocean telegraph would help promote peace in the world, an idea expressed, for example, in a poem entitled “The Mission of the Cable,” which appeared in the New York *Evening Post*. In that poem, the cable is addressed directly and asked whether or not it would seek to instill peaceful thoughts in the nations of the world. It responds affirmatively, “*Aye, amicable! that I will!*”⁷ The idea of peace is dramatically portrayed in an allegorical image that appeared on the cover of *Harper’s Weekly* on August 14, 1858 (fig. 27). Here, two angels or goddesses, apparently representing America and Great Britain, one of which is holding an olive branch, float through the water along the length of the cable. Strewn about on the ocean floor are

⁶ Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*, London: Oxford University Press, 1964, p. 15.

⁷ “The Mission of the Cable,” *The Evening Post* [New York] (26 August 1858), p. 1.

various objects symbolic of violence and war, including skulls with bullet holes in them, a pistol, cannon barrels and a sword, among other debris, all now consigned to the deep.

In a similar vein, a political cartoon entitled “Effect of the Atlantic Cable on European Despots” suggests that the Atlantic Cable will promote democracy in the world by helping to bring down these “European despots” (fig. 28). How exactly this would take place is not made explicit, but that it would somehow result from increased cooperation between the United States and Great Britain is clearly suggested. Indeed, the idea that the cable would solidify and improve relations between the two English-speaking democracies was held by many, as the cooperation displayed in this political cartoon between the common nineteenth-century caricatures representing them (John [Bull] and [Brother] Jonathan) highlights. A similar theme also featuring caricatures representing the two countries (though in this case Brother Jonathan resembles Uncle Sam) is presented on a souvenir coin issued to commemorate the completion of the Atlantic Cable (figs 29 & 30). On the obverse, the two figures greet each other across the Atlantic Ocean with lightning bolts leaping out of their hands, while a ship, in the process of laying the cable, steams its way from shore to shore. John Bull exclaims: “How are you Jonathan”? The figure representing the United States, in a somewhat standardized dialectical American English, replies, “Purty well old feller / Heow’s yerself”? The message is vaguer than the one in the political cartoon, but the idea of friendly, or friendlier, relations between the two countries is clearly present. While I will develop this point further, later on, it should be noted here already that the expressions of Anglo-American brotherhood in relation to the Atlantic Cable were at least somewhat forced, if not outright ironic, since the two countries had, at the time, about as many reasons to be suspicious of each other as to be trustful of one another.

In what could be considered an extension of the theme of peace and harmony that the Atlantic Cable was supposed to foster, illustrations

sometimes highlighted a religious view of the project. These examples could also be compared, in certain ways, to those previously discussed that focus on Nature and the idea that the new technology would not disrupt either the preeminence or harmony of the natural world, to the extent that they suggest that this great technological feat achieved by man in no way upset the preeminence or harmony of a God-ruled religious world either. Contemporary articles and poems, in fact, often insisted on the idea that, if this man-made achievement was indeed impressive, the real credit was due to God. One poem, entitled “The Atlantic Telegraph,” which appeared in the *Boston Daily Evening Transcript*, for example, begins, “Give to God the glory! O’er the Atlantic wave / See the ships returning, beautiful and brave!”⁸ Indeed, if advances in science and technology had certainly brought challenges to nineteenth-century religious beliefs, in the year preceding the publication of Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*, a solid religious faith was still held by a large number of people, and others no doubt felt a need to reaffirm that faith or perhaps even to convince themselves and others of its continued truthfulness and solidity in the face of challenges from science and technology. At the same time, as Todd Timmons points out, many Americans in the nineteenth century “embraced progress through science and technology almost as if it were a religion.”⁹ The two apparently opposed worlds were, in fact, often closely linked at the time, and, as Timmons also notes, “America’s newfound leadership in technology was understood to be a direct consequence of the country’s superior religious and moral standing.”¹⁰ One illustration, for example, shows William L. Hudson, captain of the *Niagara*, offering up prayer just after having landed the American end of the cable on the Newfoundland shore (fig. 31). He is surrounded by the officers and crew of the ship, with bowed heads. The bucolic atmosphere of the site is

⁸ “The Atlantic Telegraph,” *Boston Daily Evening Transcript* (20 August 1858), p. 4.

⁹ Todd Timmons, *Science and Technology in Nineteenth-Century America*, Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood, 2005, p. 5.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

suggested once again by the trees above the level of the men on the left- and right-hand sides of the image, but the most striking, and potentially blasphemous, aspect of the illustration is the single telegraph pole towering above everything—the men, the trees and the central figure of Captain Hudson himself. Already strung with telegraph wires stretching out on both sides of the pole, especially in the context of this scene of prayer and religious reverence, its form is suggestive of a cross and seems to indicate that the very thing the religiously themed illustrations were in part implicitly trying to counteract—the usurpation of traditional religious belief by a veneration of technology—had already become operative. A more purely religious tone is offered in another illustration depicting the Atlantic Cable celebration at Trinity Church, New York (**fig. 32**), but, it should be noted, the religious dimension is able to dominate this depiction of the robed procession solemnly entering the church at least in part because the cable—indeed technology in any form—is not visually represented.

Nationalistic Appropriation

The examples of displacement strategies in the illustrations of the Atlantic Cable I have discussed so far tend to emphasize the purely technical aspects of telegraphy and the process of the laying of the Atlantic Cable or focus on the positive and more universalist dimensions of the project, highlighting, for example, improved communications, which would supposedly lead to better understanding among nations and greater peace in the world (notably through a strengthened friendship between the United States and Great Britain) or a hope for the spreading of democracy. Others, as just pointed out, underscore a religious dimension of the new link. But another group of illustrations focuses more directly on the human dimension of the Atlantic Cable project, emphasizing aspects such as the heroic drama of the exploit, the great men who helped bring about the success of the undertaking and the extensive celebrations that took place once the news of the completed

link reached the public. And many of these illustrations can be seen as having a more or less overtly nationalistic aspect to them, as did many of the celebrations of the event and the articles and poems on the topic¹¹. This aspect is in part a direct consequence of the appearance of these illustrations in outlets of the popular press since each nation's newspapers and magazines (and one can certainly include here the two "instant books" I have examined) tend to help reinforce nationalism regardless of the subject matter. As Ernest Gellner points out, it is the very nature of mass media, "the pervasiveness and importance of abstract, centralized, one to many communication, which itself automatically engenders the core idea of nationalism, quite irrespective of what in particular is being put into the specific messages."¹² Indeed, in the case of cultural nationalism as it is strengthened by the popular press, to a certain extent, the medium is the message. But beyond this intrinsically nationalistic aspect, the illustrations of the Atlantic Cable project often suggest more or less explicitly that credit for the success of the endeavor belonged primarily, if not exclusively, to the United States of America. And while expressing national pride in relation to such an exploit may seem relatively natural, it was actually somewhat ironic, to say the least, since if the main promoter of the project was indeed the American Cyrus W. Field, there were many good reasons for seeing the Atlantic Cable as more of a British, rather than American, undertaking. For example, the British government offered assistance for the project before the hesitant American government finally agreed to participate; the British people subscribed to a greater amount of Atlantic Cable stock than Americans did; the cable itself was manufactured in England; one of the two ships laying the cable was British, and a majority of the ships in the so-called "telegraph squadron" were British; and, finally, both ends of the main transatlantic stretch of the

¹¹ For a description and analysis of the nationalistic aspect of the cable celebrations and cable poetry, see my article: "Creating a National Heritage, Denying a National Crisis: The Atlantic Cable Celebrations and Atlantic Cable Poetry," *Ceremonies and Spectacles: Performing American Culture*, eds. Teresa Alves, Teresa Cid and Heinz Ickstadt, Amsterdam: VU U P, 2000, pp. 152-160.

¹² Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1983, p. 127.

cable were linked to telegraph stations on British territory (Valentia Bay, Ireland, on the one end and Trinity Bay, Newfoundland, on the other).

One sub-group of illustrations that can be seen in this context are those emphasizing the exploit as a heroic drama, carried out, they often more or less subtly seem to suggest, primarily, or most importantly, by daring Americans. An illustration in *Harper's Weekly* of the two ships that laid the cable, starting off in opposite directions, just after having spliced together the two halves of the cable in the middle of Atlantic, could be interpreted as another representation of the Anglo-American cooperation that made the completion of the project possible (fig. 33). But the American ship, the *Niagara*—even if part of it is cut off by the right-hand margin of the image—looms larger than the British *Agamemnon*, which appears not only smaller, but is also heading away from the viewer. And, most significantly for this discussion, the American flag is seen flying prominently above the stern of the *Niagara*, while the flag on the British ship is much smaller and its details barely discernible. Finally, while men engaged in various activities, including the paying out of the cable itself, are clearly visible on the deck of the American ship, the *Agamemnon* is so small that no members of its crew can be seen. The same illustration appears in Mullaly's book as well (indicating a certain circulation of at least some of the images), and his work also includes another image of the *Niagara*, accompanied by its tender, with no British ships in sight, and with both of the American ships flying flags, the *Niagara*, the regular national flag of the United States, and the tender, the U.S. Navy jack (an ensign with white stars on a dark [blue in actuality] field, fig. 34).

The landing of the cable on the western shore of the Atlantic Ocean was also sometimes presented as a heroic act with nationalistic overtones. An illustration in *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, for example, shows the crew of the *Niagara* erecting a liberty pole at Bull's Arm Bay (or Bull Arm Bay), a part, in fact, of the larger Trinity Bay in Newfoundland (fig. 35). While the nationalism is, perhaps, not overly obvious here, there is, in fact, something

rather aggressive about the American crew of a United States naval vessel putting up a liberty pole, one of the key symbols of the American Revolution, in which the United States gained its independence from Great Britain, on the shores of what was, of course, still British territory. No American flag appears in the image, but none is necessary. The illustration, in fact, portrays what looks like a taking possession of a foreign land by Americans or perhaps an implicit incitement of the Canadians to rise up themselves and claim their own liberty, also in the form of independence from Great Britain. It could also be noted that the liberty pole, somewhat like the telegraph pole discussed earlier, also suggests a cross, thus adding a subtle religious layer to the nationalistic dimension.

Another group of illustrations related to the Atlantic Cable that can be seen as implicitly, and sometimes overtly, nationalistic is represented by the many portraits of the principal actors in the “heroic” drama. This collection of “great men” made up a sort of Atlantic Cable pantheon of eminent Victorians, who very frequently just happened to be American. The figures include, for example, Samuel F. B. Morse, the holder of the American patent on the telegraph, who was also one of Cyrus W. Field’s partners (**fig. 36**), and William L. Hudson, U.S. naval officer and captain of the *Niagara* (**fig. 37**). But the America who was singled out for the most praise was, not surprisingly, Cyrus W. Field himself, who was consistently, and justifiably, it must be said, presented as the leading force behind the project. His portrait, as already noted, appears on the frontispiece of Briggs and Maverick’s book (and he is, of course, depicted in Mullaly’s work as well), along with his distinctive signature, which became almost as famous as the image of the man himself. Another commemorative medal that was struck in honor of the completion of the Atlantic Cable features the bust of Field on the obverse (**fig. 38**). While a solid gold specimen was presented to Field himself, souvenir copies were also struck for sale to the general public. On the medal, Field appears like a Roman general or emperor, his head encircled by a laurel wreath, symbolic of victory.

The reverse of the medal (**fig. 39**) includes an inscription in Latin around the outer edge, *Nil Desperandum Perseverantia Vincit* (“Never Despair – Perseverance Conquers”), thus reinforcing the comparison with a hero of Ancient Rome, and an inscription in English reading, “Presented to Cyrus W. Field, by a Few of His Friends in New York, for His Perseverance, in Superintending the Laying of the Atlantic Telegraph Cable. Aug. 5TH 1858.” A more overtly nationalistic depiction of Field appeared on the cover of the August 21, 1858 issue of *Harper’s Weekly* (**fig. 40**). In this portrait, Field’s image is surrounded not by a laurel wreath, but by an elaborate frame draped with a piece of the Atlantic Cable. The cable itself thus seems to take on the heroic symbolism of the laurel wreath it replaces. Scattered along the bottom of the frame are various tools and instruments that symbolize human technological advancement, and in the center is an escutcheon emblazoned with the stars and stripes of the flag of the United States, making a clear statement that the great achievement of the Atlantic Cable is distinctively American.

Depictions of the celebrations commemorating the completion of the Atlantic Cable—which sometimes got a bit out of control, as when the cupola of the New York City Hall caught on fire during the fireworks display that were part of festivities held on August 18, 1858—also often include elements emphasizing Americanness. One strikingly nationalistic image, which appears in the September 11, 1858 issue of *Harper’s Weekly* shows the crew of the American ship *Niagara* (“The Niagaras”) parading in the streets of New York City carrying a replica of their vessel and, more importantly for this discussion, passing in front of a row of prominently displayed American flags (**fig. 41**). The importance of the power of images is indirectly highlighted in this particular illustration since the group is depicted as it passes in front of Mathew Brady’s photographic studio.