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Being American in Europe, 1750-1860

Daniel Kilbride

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While visiting Europe In 1844, Harry McCall of Philadelphia wrote to his cousin back home of his disappointment. He didn’t mind Paris, but he preferred the company of Americans to Parisians. Furthermore, he vowed to be "an American, heart and soul" wherever he traveled, but "particularly in England." Why was he in Europe if he found it so distasteful? After all, travel in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was expensive, time consuming, and frequently uncomfortable.

Being American in Europe, 1750–1860 tracks the adventures of American travelers while exploring large questions about how these experiences affected national identity. Daniel Kilbride searched the diaries, letters, published accounts, and guidebooks written between the late colonial period and the Civil War. His sources are written by people who, while prominent in their own time, are largely obscure today, making this account fresh and unusual.

Exposure to the Old World generated varied and contradictory concepts of American nationality. Travelers often had diverse perspectives because of their region of origin, race, gender, and class. Americans in Europe struggled with the tension between defining the United States as a distinct civilization and situating it within a wider world. Kilbride describes how these travelers defined themselves while they observed the politics, economy, morals, manners, and customs of Europeans. He locates an increasingly articulate and refined sense of simplicity and virtue among these visitors and a gradual disappearance of their feelings of awe and inferiority.

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