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The *Journal of American Studies* as an Archive of American Studies in Britain

Bridget Bennett

I'd like to open with thanks to Katie McGettigan and Will Norman, co-editors of the *Journal of American Studies* (JAS) and to all those involved in the production and management of the journal as well as all those who work so hard to enable the continued operation of the British Association for American Studies (BAAS). Without their work, often undertaken with little recognition or support from their employing institutions, we would not be here. We, the wider subject community, owe them a lot.

My reflections centre on the status of the journal as an enlightening archive of American Studies in Britain. The history of the journal is instructive about the foundation and ambitions of BAAS. It reveals the ways the journal has been a key intellectual and financial instrument for the development of BAAS.¹ First, JAS has contributed to the intellectual aims of the association and its membership. Second, together with the association's membership fees, it has provided the financial means by which BAAS has been able to continue despite various, sometimes profound, difficulties. The journal has been the flagship publication for BAAS ever since its inaugural issue, edited by Dennis Welland, with an all-male editorial board. Though a lot has changed since it first appeared, the energy and values leading first to the founding of BAAS in 1955 and then the journal in April 1967 have been evident over time. It's therefore highly appropriate that as we celebrate 70 years of BAAS we also reflect upon the *Journal of American Studies*.

¹ All the information about the journal and BAAS comes from the webpages, respectively, of JAS <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/journal-of-american-studies> and BAAS <https://baas.ac.uk/>

The story of their close and intertwined relationship can be seen most clearly when we look back to the journal's long history, including the history of its two immediate precursors. The first of these, *The Bulletin of American Studies*, was published from 1956 to 1959. Much of the early language as well as the ambitions that have filtered their way through the decades into the current BAAS website and the journal are set out clearly in the *Bulletin*. Subsequently, *The Bulletin of the British Association for American Studies New Series* was published from 1960 to 1966. The importance of this decade-long history is publicly noted in the front matter of the journal where the *Bulletin* and the *New Series* are acknowledged as prior publications. It's worth drawing attention to the fact that this print history is enshrined this way for it had important implications for the contractual negotiations between BAAS and the journal's publisher Cambridge University Press around a decade ago. Understanding the relationship between the *Bulletin*, *JAS* and BAAS was a vital part of the work that took place to negotiate this new relationship between association, journal and publisher. In turn, the favourable outcome of that lengthy process secured the financial stability of BAAS. It also secured the future of both association and journal by the establishment of a regular and substantial funding stream.

But I want to turn back still further. In 1941 the publisher Henry Luce, in a famous editorial in *Life* magazine, had urged the US to end its isolationist stance and enter World War Two to support democracy and freedom and promote American values.² Coining the term 'the American Century' he argued that such values would elevate humanity. Luce, the son of a missionary, used overtly Christian language. His tone and ambition takes us still further back into the historical past. His words and ideology are undoubtedly

² Henry R. Luce, "The American Century," *Life*, 17 February 1941, pp.61-65.

indebted to the powerful idea of Manifest Destiny, something itself borrowing from earlier iterations of the ambitions of white men. However, it was in the post-war period when the United States and the Soviet Union emerged as competing superpowers, that the first stirrings of American Studies in Europe took place. BAAS emerged from a series of Fulbright conferences at the universities of Cambridge and Oxford. Its foundation coincided with that of other American Studies associations across Europe, including the European Association for American Studies, founded in Salzburg in 1954, just nine years after the end of the war. The EAAS aims to connect European scholars of the United States through a confederation of national organisations. One of those is of course BAAS, founded a year after EAAS. When BAAS was founded, its core membership of BAAS was made up of historians and literary scholars, chiefly men. Their aims (which have continued to the present) include a commitment not just to engaging with educational institutions (ranging from schools to universities) but also with all those with an interest in the study of the United States. Its founders drew on the war's aftermath and the overlapping and competing visions of possibility and hope that were coalescing around this period.

The first issue of the *Journal of American Studies* appeared just over a decade later in April 1967.³ The cover had a simple design; the volume number and dates are all at the top of the page. The title is in much larger font and dominates the middle of the page. Finally, though the name of the publisher, Cambridge University, occupies a single line, the words 'for the British Association for American Studies' are immediately below this and in a smaller font. Thus, while the title dominates the page, it is the name of the

³ *Journal of American Studies* Vol. 1, No. 1, Apr., 1967. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/i27552758>

university press rather than the association that is given the next most prominent position. The new publication sets out its ambitions clearly in a statement of intent published on the back cover,

The Journal aims to promote the study of the history, institutions, literature and culture of the United States.

It publishes work by specialists of any nationality on American history, literature, politics, geography and related subjects. Articles which cross the conventional lines of those disciplines are welcome, as are comparative studies of American and other cultures. It also disseminates information about work in progress and provides a platform for the exchange of scholarly information and opinion.

The editorial policy is not committed to any political viewpoint or ideology, but will not preclude responsible discussion of controversial topics.

Right from the outset this identifies inter- and multidisciplinary as key methodologies for the contributions the journal aimed to foster. While welcoming articles governed by such methodological approaches it also sets out intellectual debate free of editorial or other influences as a key ambition for its governance. By looking at the articles the journal currently publishes it is clear that much of this remains familiar today. Indeed, at the time of writing *JAS* describes itself as follows,

Journal of American Studies publishes work by scholars from all over the world on American literatures, history, politics, foreign relations, philosophy, art history, visual culture, economics, film, popular culture, geography, material culture and related subjects. We also welcome research topics covering fields related to American Studies and which include (in alphabetical order): African American

Studies; African Diasporic Studies; America in the World Studies; Asian American Studies; Chicana/o and Latina/o Studies; Chinese American Studies; Cultural Studies; Globalisation Studies; Indigenous Studies; Hemispheric Studies; Slavery Studies; Transatlantic Studies; Transnational Studies.

As this reveals, the current description of the journal substantially expands its areas of study and coverage to reflect the developments that have taken place within the rubric of American Studies. These are included in the lengthy alphabetical list which is itself a reworked version of the second paragraph of the inaugural issue. However, we should note that the ambition signalled in the first paragraph of the inaugural issue, namely that ‘The Journal aims to *promote the study of the history, institutions, literature and culture of the United States*’ [emphasis added], has not disappeared completely. It appears instead in expanded form on BAAS’s website which states that,

The British Association for American Studies was founded in 1955. It exists to *promote, support and encourage the study of the United States* in the Universities, Colleges and Schools of the United Kingdom, and by independent scholars. It welcomes all those engaged in or connected with the study of the United States [emphasis added].

By bringing these position statements together we can see the vital and ongoing relationship between journal and association. We can also see how the journal has developed over six decades, a development corresponding to the emergence of the new methods of a dynamically changing American Studies. Taken together, these statements are instructive about the ways that continuity was maintained by BAAS and its journal working closely together to achieve the association’s aims.

BAAS emerged in the 1950s in relation to the intellectual interests of scholars working in within institutions with conservative curricula. They had limited ways of engaging with the material that stimulated them and wanted to change that. Its foundation was indebted to the soft power initiatives of the US as it sought to spread a process of Americanisation. This means that BAAS, like other American Studies organisations, has often had to navigate a tricky position. As we have seen, BAAS aimed to ‘promote, support and encourage the study of the United States’. It was often assisted by financial support from the US Embassy in London. Yet it also wanted to enable scrutiny and robust critique of the US which meant distancing itself from this source of funding. Maintaining this has always been difficult and has often been the subject of debate and disquiet among members. In 2025, seven decades after its founding as a scholarly association, BAAS took the ethically and politically welcome decision to cancel the BAAS/US Embassy small grants programme. I want to applaud the fact it has publicly severed the connection between itself and the Embassy.

Thinking about the foundation of BAAS and the continuing close relationship between the association and journal, I want to make two final remarks. First, we would do well to remember and to continue to argue for the journal’s explicit commitment to foster intellectual debate, including what it called ‘responsible discussion of controversial topics’. Second, in recalling the energy and commitment of those who founded the journal and BAAS, even while acknowledging the critical short-sightedness of a group of male intellectuals who still used the word ‘schoolmaster’ in a period in which many teachers were women, we might reinforce our own ambitions and even give ourselves solace in the face of ongoing and increasing provocations. Turning back to reflect on the history of BAAS and the journal returns us to a very different historical

moment, to a project that was simultaneously a consequence of soft power and a progressive location for scholars of American Studies. Our predecessors were ushering in a world in which they themselves were becoming the historical past just as they were imagining an altered future in which change was possible.

Bridget Bennett is Professor of American Literature and Culture at the University of Leeds. She was the recent recipient of a Leverhulme Major Fellowship. This enabled her to write *The Dissenting Atlantic: Archives and Unquiet Libraries, 1776-1865* (LSU Press, 2025) which was awarded the 2025 Shelley Fisher Fishkin Prize by the American Studies Association and an Honourable Mention for the 2026 BAAS book prize. A former Vice Chair of BAAS, she has broad interests in US literary culture. This is reflected in her publications which include “‘The Silence Surrounding the Hut’: Invisible Slaves and Vanished Indians in *Wieland*” *Early American Literature* (2018) which was awarded the 2019 Arthur Miller Prize; “Guerrilla Inscriptions: The 1851 Census and Transatlantic Abolition” *Atlantic Studies* (2020); “Nineteenth-Century Abolition and the Unquiet Library: Transatlantic Print Culture and the Making of the ‘Celebrated Philanthropist’, Anthony Benezet” in *American Philanthropy at Home and Abroad*, eds Ben Offiler and Rachel Williams (2022); “England/ New England: A British Quaker and a Fugitive from Slavery Encounter Each Other on a Train, 1850”, *Crossings: Nineteenth-Century American Literature on the Move*, ed Edward Sugden (2022); “A Volume of a ‘Different Hue’: Transatlantic Print and the Making of the *Aurora Borealis*, a Quaker Literary Annual” *Early American Literature* (2026). Two further articles, in the *Irish Journal of American Studies* and the *Journal of Transnational American Studies*, will both appear in 2026.