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_Inchiquin’s Letters_ and
Anglo-American Nationalism

A significant campaign in the Paper War commenced with the appearance in 1810 of _Inchiquin, the Jesuit’s Letters_. Credited to ‘some unknown foreigner’, _Inchiquin’s Letters_ purported to be private correspondence to and from an Irish priest, Inchiquin, residing in the United States. _Inchiquin’s Letters_ was a seminal work in the Paper War, a more ambitious retort to foreign criticisms than previous American rejoinders. Responses to _Inchiquin’s Letters_, both British and American, also broke conventions of trans-Atlantic paper warring, making the episode an excellent study in the dynamics of Anglo-American cultural relations, a window into the shifting nationalisms of the era of the War of 1812.

The years surrounding the War of 1812 and the Inchiquin episode saw both an increased tendency of Britons to criticize the United States and growing willingness of American writers to offer rejoinders defending their rising nation. British images of the United States evolved during the era, reflecting wartime tensions and concerns over the identity and future of Britain. Tories, supportive of a tough stance against the United States on maritime and commercial issues and fearful of the prospect of American-style reforms at home, depicted the United States as a nation subservient to France, suffering from the divorce of the Church from society, rift with corruption and moral decline. At the turn-of-the-century, British conservatives had found some Americans (mostly Federalist Anglophiles) to be kindred spirits. Increasingly, in an era of diplomatic tensions and war, Britons increasingly found it less desirable to split hairs about good-bad Americans.

Likewise, Anglo-American polemics encouraged American self-expression. American writers experimented with expansive modes of nationalism years before General Jackson’s triumph at New Orleans in January 1815 or even the declaration of war in June 1812. Americans
across the political spectrum – Republicans and Federalists, Anglophobes and Anglophiles – agreed that British commentators had gone too far in their criticisms. Yet, like the War of 1812, the literary conflict illuminated political and sectional divisions. Although these were vital years for the maturation of American nationalism, the competing notions of American identity worked against the development of a univocal response. Irenic, non-partisan visions of American history and culture vied with sectional and partisan varieties. Regional and political divisions flourished at the very time that a growing number of American writers were rallying to defend the United States. American declarations of independence continued to be juxtaposed with reminders of dependence upon Britain.

American rejoinders to foreign criticisms during this era also suffered from problems that complicated the development of American nationalism. The charge of plagiarism troubled vindicatory literature. Historians have explained the era of the War of 1812 to have been limiting for African Americans and that political participation for women became scarcer; Anglo-American polemics of that era were similarly limiting on matters of race and gender.¹

Ingersoll's Declaration of Independence

The author of Inchiquin's Letters was Charles Jared Ingersoll (1782–1862), a Philadelphia lawyer and aspiring Republican politician. Ingersoll had a variety of reasons to produce a nationalistic tract. Ingersoll's familial lineage was ill suited to an increasingly democratic political atmosphere. His grandfather, a British colonial official, remained a Loyalist and was tarred and feathered during the Revolution. His father, Jared Ingersoll, a signer of the Constitution, was a committed Federalist who notoriously described Jefferson's election in 1800 as a 'great subversion'.² As Charles Jared noted some years later, he was 'brought up to respect Adams, admire Hamilton, and revere Washington'.³ Ingersoll remained a Federalist while at Princeton. Back in Philadelphia, he joined the 'Tuesday Club' associated with ultra-Federalist Joseph Dennie and contributed to Dennie's Port-Folio during that journal's early, Anglophilic, and ultra-Federalist, years. Ingersoll even served as one of Dennie's attorneys during the editor's libel trial in 1805.⁴ As Ingersoll's biographer explained, 'The large majority of the associates whom he acquired from his father and from his position in society were members of the defeated and discomfited Federalists, and partook to a large degree of the opinion quoted from Dennie.'⁵