

MPhil dissertation proposal

Much of the recent revival of critical interest in the previously understudied American writer and activist John Neal (galvanised by the publication of *John Neal and Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture* (2011), edited by Edward Watts and David J. Carlson) has touched upon, or treated in some depth, his proclamation of the need for a new “declaration of independence in the republic of letters” (preface to *Rachel Dyer* (1828)). Critical convention has been to gloss this statement as an argument for the liberation of American literature from the demands and conventions of the British literary market, with Neal’s remark read by Watts and Carlson as a nationalist censure on the ‘Britishness’ of the writing of a number of his contemporaries. In my MPhil dissertation I will suggest that this is only a partial reading of Neal’s phrase and that his declaration of independence also refers to a literary revolution intended to establish the independence of the American writer from the American state.

I will explore how Neal’s work argues for a “republic of letters” in which the American writer is an independent political entity whose function is to act as a ‘check and balance’ on the shortcomings and hypocrisies of the American nation. Drawing on both my undergraduate dissertation, which discussed the use of early American gothic as a counter-literature to the ideals of the American Enlightenment, and Teresa A. Goddu’s (*Gothic America, Narrative, History and Nation* (1997)) investigation into John Neal’s interest in Native American language, I will show how Neal’s attempt to establish this literary independence of the American author was predicated on the appropriation of a linguistic style based on what he perceived to be “the candor, and straightforwardness” of Native American speech. Taking as a starting point, Neal’s gothic novels *Logan* (1822) and *Rachel Dyer* (1828), his short story *Otter-Bag, the Oneida Chief* (1829), and the criticism he made of the literary style of his contemporaries and predecessors in the use of gothic as a counter-literature (Charles Brockden Brown, James Fennimore-Cooper and Washington Irving), my dissertation will illustrate how Neal appropriates this supposedly honest language - chosen for its fundamental and pointed separation from the social and philosophical ideals upon which the American nation had been settled - as a means of freeing the American author from any complicity with that which they felt impelled to critique.

As this project will rely heavily upon Neal’s works of literary criticism, Cambridge’s excellent provision of electronic access to journals to which Neal contributed, including the *New England Magazine* and *Portland Magazine*, would be invaluable to my dissertation. The early weeks of the “American Texts and Contexts” seminar series will also provide valuable insights into the literary-historical context within which Neal and his contemporaries wrote.