

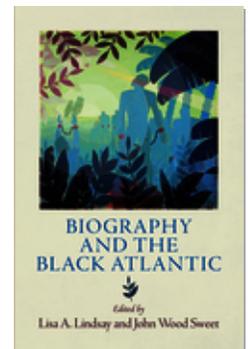


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CHAPTER THREE

Robinson Charley: The Ideological Underpinnings of Atlantic History

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In his 2005 *Atlantic History: Concept and Contours*, Bernard Bailyn gestured to the critical importance of the ideological and institutional context in which the field of Atlantic Studies was born. Recounting the story of the early conferences and publications in the 1950s that explored the foundations of an “Atlantic Civilization,” he acknowledged that the idea of Atlantic history provided a “historic, ‘inevitable’ Atlantic Community” that legitimized and sustained a variety of postwar governmental initiatives (including the Marshall Plan, the Truman Doctrine, and NATO), with the direct support and encouragement of nongovernmental organizations (such as the Atlantic Council, American Committee for Atlantic Institutions, and American Council of NATO).¹ He even cited an unnamed young Marxist historian who attacked R. R. Palmer and Jacques Godechot for their early work on the Atlantic Revolutions in precisely these terms, as “apologists for NATO and the newfangled idea of an Atlantic Community.”² Yet Bailyn quickly backed away from this perspective, explaining, “however inconclusive and unsure, however close to the ideological concerns of the postwar years, the idea of the Atlantic Community had developed not abstractly or deductively, but empirically, from [historians’] own documentary research.”³ On the basis of my own empirical, documentary research—not on the history of the Atlantic over four centuries, but on the history of Western Europe in the critical decade that precedes the books and conferences in Bailyn’s account—I propose that we reopen this line of inquiry. The modern period, in particular the twentieth century, rarely figures in Atlantic history; yet my archival evidence suggests that if we are to

understand the concept and the contours of Atlantic history and historiography as it has developed over its early decades, and if we are to appreciate the riposte represented by the Black Atlantic put forward in this volume, it is essential that we understand the ideological context in which the idea of an Atlantic Civilization was conceived.

My window on that ideological context is the Marshall Plan, the aid package delivered to Western Europe from 1948 to 1952, precisely one of those “postwar governmental initiatives” that, according to Bailyn, was legitimized and sustained by Atlantic history. The Economic Recovery Program (ERP), as it was formally known, was designed to help Western Europe get back on its feet economically; as the label “economic miracle” that retrospectively came to define the reconstruction of Western Europe in this period suggests, it was an enormous success. While the levels of growth and prosperity achieved in Western Europe in a very short time are impressive, was there really anything “miraculous” about it? The richest country on the globe left standing after World War II, the United States provided aid and technical assistance for rebuilding the infrastructures and economies of the other most developed industrial nations (in Western Europe), at a time when America and Western Europe had favored access to resources across the globe. Given these conditions, there is nothing “miraculous” about the economic recovery of Western Europe.

What is truly miraculous, however, is the ideological rehabilitation of Europe that accompanied its economic revival. Within five years after the fall of Hitler, the liberation of Auschwitz, and the reduction of Europe to an endless sea of rubble, Europe, with its partners in North America, was celebrated as one of “Two Continents, One Civilization.” Europe, in 1951, as the vanguard of civilization: who could make that argument? The information officers connected to the Marshall Plan, collaborating with their enthusiastic partners in Western Europe. And it took a lot of work. It took what Marshall Plan historian David Ellwood has called “the greatest international propaganda campaign ever produced in peacetime.”⁴ For four years, American and European information officers stationed in the capitals of eighteen Western European countries provided a steady stream of newspaper reports, radio shows, pamphlets, films, small traveling exhibits, and world-fair style spectacles that defined the Recovery and the world it was bringing into being. One of the most important concepts that emerged from this campaign was the idea of Atlantic Civilization.

The spectacle of the Recovery orchestrated all over Western Europe

between 1948 and 1952 looked very different depending on its context. Germany, for example, where the story was told almost entirely by the occupying Americans, and where the ideological challenges represented by the recent past were most severe, differed profoundly from the home-grown campaign orchestrated by the British Socialist Labour government working to create “fair shares for all,” but also to define Britain’s position after a war they had “won,” but which had greatly diminished its economic and political power and influence, especially in relation to the United States. And both Germany and Britain differed from France, which had succumbed to fascism, and was happy to collaborate with the Americans on the occasion of the Recovery to publicly pronounce its favored place in the postwar world. As different as these “recoveries” were, they were all united by the impulse to rewrite the story of the past and the present, to turn Europe in the rubble into a blank screen—a veritable tabula rasa on which to project a simple, utopian vision of Europe and the world’s peaceful, prosperous future. The Recovery offered the occasion to reinvent a liberal tale of origins, a very particular eighteenth-century liberal tale of origins, one whose mythical past was now situated explicitly in the Atlantic.⁵

In the spirit of this volume, I will share the vision of the Atlantic generated across Western Europe in the Marshall Plan era, and highlight the ideological impulse behind this effort, by carefully analyzing one biography. Commissioned in 1948 by the British Labour Government Central Office of Information (COI), and produced and widely disseminated as an eleven-minute cartoon by John Halas and Joy Batchelor, Britain’s so-called “Walt Disney,” this film was touted in a press release as “the COI’s best cinema shop window on the information campaign” it had been staging since it took power in 1946. But this “biography” also offers a window on how the British government navigated the requirement of the Marshall Plan that recipients publicize and explain the recovery the United States was making possible. The 250-year biography of “Robinson Charley,” a clever rewrite of Daniel Defoe’s 1719 *Robinson Crusoe*, is particularly useful as a window on this broader international propaganda campaign because it does explicitly what was more subtly accomplished across Western Europe, which was to use the occasion of the Recovery to recount the long historical foundations of the present as a series of “Robinsonades.”

When Marx used the term Robinsonade in 1857, it was to mock not Defoe’s eponymous hero, but rather the manner in which liberal political economists since the eighteenth century had been celebrating and naturalizing the progress

of capitalist civilization by recounting “Robinson-Crusoe-like-nursery tales.” In Marx’s words, “The individual and isolated hunter or fisher who forms the starting point with Smith and Ricardo belongs to the insipid illusions of the eighteenth century.” Presented “not as a result of history, but as its starting point,” the property-owning and -improving, trucking, and bartering individual at the heart of liberal theory naturalizes, for Marx, the rise of capitalism, even as it expunges the “conquest, enslavement, robbery, and murder” that were, for him, constitutive of his history.⁶ As we shall see when we move from Robinson Charley in Britain to the information campaign in Germany and France, information officers agreed that the isolated individual, with all the natural proclivities of liberal civilization, was there to be regenerated from the rubble of Western Europe; his long historical adventure took place within an Atlantic frame; and his “history” bore no traces of violence or struggle or exploitation—not in the distant past, not even in the immediate past.

The “Atlantic Civilization” born in the context of the Marshall Plan has clear ideological contours. Are they helpful for understanding the concept and contours of Atlantic history as it has developed over time? I think so. But before returning to that discussion, I will let the star of the British Recovery, “Robinson Charley,” introduce us to the Atlantic world within which its government was reorienting its population in 1948.

Robinson Charley (1948)

The official account of Robinson Charley’s life, produced by the Economic Information Unit of the COI of the British Labour Government in 1948, begins in 1690 when Robinson Charley, his wife (Mrs. Charley), and his son (Charley Junior) were the sole inhabitants of a little island possessing a house, a storage shed, a boathouse, and a farm.⁷ Their fields, their livestock, and the sea provided them with food; the husband and wife raised sheep whose wool they spun, wove into fabric, and stocked, one bolt at a time, in their storage shed. “For many years—for centuries—the island was self-supporting. If Charley needed some luxury that he couldn’t make himself he could always sell a few surplus goods and buy what he needed from abroad.” Of the adventures he had on his initial journeys “abroad,” of the places he visited and people he met, the pirates he avoided, the navy that may have protected him, or the laws that regulated his trade or gave him his original title to his island we know nothing. We know only that he set off in his rowboat with three bolts of fabric and returned with ceramic pots full of spices.

“Life went on like this until about 200 years ago (1748), when Charley started to use machinery to make his goods.” Now Mr. Charley used a steamboat instead of a rowboat, and devoted all of his and his wife’s labor to making bolts of fabric because, “making goods paid better than just farming by itself.” A factory allowed him to produce more bolts of fabric, take more trips, and return with more and more luxuries. “His prosperity increased, and so did the population.” Babies popped up in cradles on the lawn in front of Charley’s house, which was now twice the size of his original modest cottage; the paths connecting his factory to his storage shed, and the storage shed to the boathouse, were replaced by railroads. “Charley was the most go-ahead manufacturer and trader in the world.” In the early nineteenth century, Charley’s trading partners were identified—not the people, but the islands on which they resided, each equipped with a dock, ready to receive Charley’s boats. Here we see for the first time that Charley’s story takes place within an Atlantic frame, limited however, to Europe and North and South America (in that order). The music playing and the café tables and windmills dotting the landscape suggest that Europe, represented only by France and Holland, was Charley’s primary trading partner; but later, North America, recognizable from its teepees, mountains, and pine trees, became another favored destination. “Being first on the market [Charley’s] goods got a good rate of exchange.” “He was doing so well he was able to build big engineering works in other countries.” South America, identifiable by its shape, its mountains, its Spanish music, and one Spanish building, was now blanketed by railroads. “In the end [Charley] owned quite a bit of property abroad, and started up all sorts of other businesses.” “Charley’s Shipping Agent,” “Charley’s Railroad,” and “Charley’s Bank” sprang up along the coast of South America, and Charley’s boats (now marked “for hire” on the side) returned repeatedly to his increasingly prosperous island, bearing not goods, but sacks of money. “This made things easier at home.” Indeed Charley’s home became a mansion, adorned with lace curtains; he and his wife wore more elegant Victorian clothes. “Now Charley only had to work for two-thirds of his imports. He could pay for the other third out of the income from his overseas investments.”

Around this time (the 1890s, from the style of the couple’s clothes), Charley started to get a little lazy and fat. While he was reducing his working hours (the sign on the factory door that once said 7-9 now read 8-6), while he was taking tea in his formal garden with his wife, while he was nodding off in the middle of the day, “other countries were getting industrialized, and their exports were beginning to edge on to some of Charley’s markets. But

did this worry Charley?” Snorting and snoring, and shaking his head as if to ward off a nightmare, Charley seemed to say, “No!” “But he would worry!” the narrator exclaims. One war, and then another, jolted Charley from his slumber. In uniform, armed first with a bayonet, and then driving a tank, Mr. Charley headed off to fight while Mrs. Charley stayed behind with the children working in the factory, now producing munitions instead of fabric, and working, once again, from 7 to 9. The wars left Mr. and Mrs. Charley’s island in ruins. His boats were destroyed in battle, or like Charley’s Shipping, Charley’s Railroad, and Charley’s Bank “abroad” they were sold, sold, sold, to pay for the hard-won victory. Europe too was in ruins, and there was a worldwide shortage of food and raw materials.

There was, however, in 1945 one prosperous island left in the Atlantic—that of Charley’s thankfully generous neighbor, Sam. Full of skyscrapers, bustling traffic, and rows and rows of stores with full shop windows, Sam’s island sent red, white, and blue-stamped boats full of much-needed supplies to help his suffering neighbors. This welcome relief from America “doesn’t mean more for Charley. It only gives him time so that he can prepare to pay his own way in the world.” But Charley knows how to do just that. By maintaining longer working hours (7-9), by innovating with new working methods that allow him to increase his production and thereby his exports, Robinson Charley will be able to restore his beautiful island and resume his position as a leader in the world.

This story of Robinson Charley was designed by the postwar Labour Government with the very serious goal of helping its citizens both to understand the position in which they found themselves after World War II, and to remember the deep resources they had to draw upon as they faced the tough road ahead. Robinson Charley—the precise, very clever adaptation of *Robinson Crusoe* I have just summarized—was recounted for British citizens in an 11-minute color cartoon, commissioned to accompany “On Our Way,” one of many traveling exhibits by which the government communicated with its citizens about the role they were expected to play to set the nation “on its way” to recovery. From 1946, when the Labour Party took power, to 1948, when it commissioned this short film for this particular exhibit, the Economic Information Unit experimented with all manner of media. They spoke to their citizens in weekly “Reports to the Nation” in the press and on the radio; they papered factory walls, train stations, and schools with posters; they sent lecturers on tour and commissioned films to be shown in mobile cinemas accompanying exhibits sent to every corner of the British Isles. They

orchestrated skits in holiday hotels and mannequin parades in the textile manufacturing districts. With the help of market researchers and pollsters, they kept their fingers on the pulse of public opinion and fine-tuned their information campaign to disabuse citizens of false assumptions and help them understand what was necessary both to create the social welfare state and to restore Britain to the leadership position it once enjoyed in the world.⁸ They also used this homegrown campaign to satisfy their commitment to explain the recovery being made possible thanks to Marshall Plan aid.

In the context of this wide-ranging, unprecedented peacetime propaganda effort, the members of the Economic Information Unit were particularly proud of Robinson Charley. In a press release distributed in late 1948 describing the first three films in which he starred, the development of this character is explained, as well as the special role that film was seen to play in achieving the government's information objectives. It begins,

The change from war to peace brought its challenge to all branches of Government publicity. No longer was there a clear national 'cause', different sections of the community were apt to have their own ideas of the common weal. Interest in the nation's affairs dropped, the horse no longer galloped up to the fount of information, it had to be led. War and all that it entails is the very stuff of film. White-papers are not. Social and economic legislation even if packed with latent drama are not easy film subjects. There is nothing to shoot until the buildings go up.

That is one of the reasons why Films Division has given the Charley series of colour cartoons a big place in its programme of Monthly Release films. The monthly film (distributed free to some 3,500 cinemas all over Great Britain) is the COI's best cinema shop window. Many subjects of real importance which we wanted to include in the series were nothing but ideas still in the blueprint or white-paper stage. Hence the need for a medium which could materialize the abstract, make pictures in the future and put flesh on any skeleton. Diagram or cartoon was the obvious answer, but there is all the difference in the world between a sequence of cold diagrams and a colour cartoon that will entertain an audience nurtured on Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck. This was the challenge with which we faced John Halas and Joy Batchelor and their answer to it was Charley.⁹

John Halas and Joy Batchelor, referred to repeatedly throughout the government correspondence as Britain's Walt Disney, made all the short cartoons projected in the traveling exhibit, "On Our Way," and a number of short and long films before they were faced with the seemingly impossible challenge of translating "the intricacies of some piece of legislation into visual terms . . . to do it in ten minutes and to make it both clear and amusing." "John Halas and his wife Joy Batchelor, however, have a flair for just this very thing. They will seize any problem straight from the mouth of the Public Records Office, disappear into their ivory tower to worry it over, and before you can say Charley Robinson they will be back with the most charming little fairy tale that you have ever heard."¹⁰

In fact the production process was a little more complicated than that, and required considerable back-and-forth between the ministry commissioning the film, the film unit within the COI, and the filmmakers. Scripts were proposed, written, and rewritten. The main character, Charley, also took a while to develop. As the press release explained,

Not that Charley sprang into the picture fully fledged. His character was slow to form. He had to represent the point of view of the audience and at the same time he had to deliver a Government message. He had to be an ordinary chap, yet his personality had to be unique. He had to be slow on the uptake and slow to act, but tenacious once his mind was made up. Then there was his voice, it might have been Stanley Holloway or Wilfred Pickles; for a long time he was likely to be a North-countryman, but eventually he settled in the Home Counties and spoke through the lips of Harold Berens. His clothes gave a great deal of trouble. If he didn't wear a tie the working man might take umbrage, if he did he was dangerously near the white collar worker. In the end a very plain tie was balanced by a boiler suit. Finally there was his signature tune to be chosen. His present motif (ocarina and clarinet) won by a short head over a rather nautical piece (piccolo and strings).¹¹

Charley made his debut in *New Town*, a film produced for the Ministry of Town and Country Planning and released on March 15, 1948. According to the blurb put out by the Films Division,

Charley bicycles along the spacious boulevard of the new town and conjures up a picture of the way things used to be—a long,

uncomfortable bus-ride to work past drab houses along smoky streets. Then he tells how he and his friends decided to put things right by planning and building a new town, which takes shape before our eyes. The plan of Stevenage is used, passing incognito by appearing upside down. A special feature [of the film] is the graphic sequence showing how the Industrial Revolution changed the face of Britain. In just under one minute we can understand clearly what can only be explained in several pages in a history book.¹²

New Town was followed with the April 12, 1948, release of *Your Very Good Health*, where Charley was commissioned by the Ministry of Health to explain the new National Health Service Scheme. Charley is represented as a bit unconvinced at the outset, but as the narrator explains the many benefits of the new NHS Scheme—free medical treatment of all kinds, improved maternity and child welfare services (for Mrs. Charley and junior), health visiting and home helps services—Charley characteristically comes around and exclaims, “Sounds a bit of alright to me.” The press release enthuses, “It is interesting to watch the development of Charley as a personality. In this second film he has a little more chin, is a little more sure of himself. In the third film of the series (*Charley’s March of Time*, released in May, dealing with the National Insurance Act) he finally finds his feet and comes across with the greatest gusto.”¹³

When Michael Balfour from the Board of Trade sent a letter and sample script to the Film Division in February 1948 about a film his office wanted to commission that would use British economic history of the past 150 years to explain the government’s current export drive, Charley was finally given the chance to play the role for which he had been born (in fact, more than 200 years earlier). In Balfour’s original script, it was another classic economic everyman—not the hero of Daniel Defoe’s 1709 *Robinson Crusoe*, but Adam Smith’s 1776 inventive, self-interested, trucking, and bartering individual—who played the leading role. Balfour’s script began, “Once upon a time there was a man who lived in a nice house with a garden. This man was very good at making things with his hands and at devising ingenious machinery. As a result all the neighbours began to come and ask him to make things for them, bringing in exchange either the materials needed to make the things with or bread, butter, bacon, and other food for the man to eat. The man was kept busy from morning till night.”¹⁴ Like Adam Smith’s naturally frugal, improving everyman who enjoyed the benefits of the division of labor, “Mr. Jack of

all trades” devoted himself to the labor he did best, “turned part of his house into a shop and almost all the rest into a factory, while he himself lived in a dingy little cubby-hole off the boiler room. He had no time to spare for working in his garden.”¹⁵ But of course that was okay because his food was provided by his neighbors, and he got the reputation of being very rich!

The rest of the original script goes through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and poses a series of “complications” that Mr. Jack-of-all-trades has to overcome. First some of his neighbors copied him, used his machines, benefited, if you will, from being “latecomers.” “Jack lost some customers, and had to share some of the wealth with his competition.” But that didn’t matter, since he still had plenty of business. But another problem developed: “our man began to be dissatisfied with the discomfort of his living conditions and his long hours of work . . . he began to shut up the shop punctually at 5 in order to have time to go to the cinema or the pub or the dog-races.” The suggested visuals in this section include “Pulling down factory, cut to nice flat with man sitting in armchair while maid lays lunch; shutters going up during day light, man going off. Pictures of man in cinema, pub, dog-races. Man doing daily dozen before breakfast, slapping chest. Man with hang-over, sitting with hands in pockets.” The most important crisis came when a couple of very bad fires broke out down the road. He rushed away to help in putting them out, leaving shop and factory empty and neglecting his customers. Moreover, he used up his complete stock of bucket, hoses, and ladders, and even had to borrow extra ones from other neighbors. After the second fire, Jack reviewed his books and realized his position was pretty serious: his neighbors got used to making their own goods, and those neighbors really hurt by the fires had little left to offer him in exchange for his goods. How was he going to make ends meet?

His neighbor Sam—who had imitated our man Jack so successfully that he had become a millionaire—was fortunately as generous as he was rich and arranged to give our man what he needs so as to tide him over. (The visuals suggest that Sam’s house be represented as a skyscraper.) But our man has a tough time ahead, because if he doesn’t increase his production by the time Sam’s gift runs out he will be in danger of starving; he won’t be able to import the materials he needs to manufacture his goods. The visuals are even more menacing: food and goods appear and then disappear; Jack grows emaciated; his factories grow idle until the last potatoes on his plate vanish.

What can he do? 1) He can concentrate on making things the neighbours still want, make as many as possible of them and see his wares

are as good as they used to be (Visuals: Man at work, hard and with care.) 2) He can try and make sure that, in return for the things he produces, he only receives the things he really needs, and go without the rest. (Visuals: Man refusing pineapples, perfume.) 3) While he naturally doesn't want to go back to living in a cubby hole next to the boiler room and working all day long, he can make the most of all the time he does not spend in the factory. (Man looking very fit, hard at work, refusing to look up when something happens outside.)

Is it any surprise that Mr. Tritton from the Film Division responded to this script with an enthusiastic, "It could be done beautifully by Charley. I'm sure of that." Elaborating, he wrote, "I've disregarded the visuals. The story is clear enough, and in light of my somewhat childish knowledge of economics it seems a fair analogy."¹⁶ He also wrote, "I think the two fires are wrong. I would call them wars and have it straight."¹⁷ It took exactly one week for John Halas and Joy Batchelor to transpose the original "Mr. Jack-of-all-trades" script into a treatment organized around Robinson Charley. But then began two months of negotiations over details. Some of the changes from Balfour's initial script simply followed from the fact that Robinson Charley was now the star of the film. Instead of an opening sequence featuring a "nice looking chap smoking a pipe in an arm chair (like J. B. Priestley), and a bobby-soxer coming in and saying, "Oh! Dear" I wish I could understand the position of this country! Could you explain it to me Uncle Mac,"¹⁸ the film opened with Robinson Charley speaking directly to the audience, interrupting a boring narrator beginning to explain Britain's economic history with a "Here! Turn it up! I thought this film was going to be about me!"¹⁹ Also some sillier ideas, like Balfour's proposal that they include among the early neighbors "a lady of doubtful reputation called Miranda who is always haggling over the butcher's bill," or the Film Division representative Denis Forman's proposal to John Halas that "we end the film with a musical number sung as a duet by Charley and his wife," were simply scrapped.²⁰

But most of the negotiations involved a delicate three-way dance between Board of Trade officials trying to propagate a very specific economic message (about exports and the present), information officers in the Film Division trying to "secure and hold" their audiences by making "films that inspire and amuse while educating,"²¹ and the filmmakers themselves, who, in the interest of the artistic quality of their film, continually rebuffed efforts by government officials to include more statistics, more facts, and in particular, more

information about exactly what Charley (and Mrs. Charley) had to do in the present.²² In general, the Board of Trade representatives were frustrated by the proportion of the story devoted to the long history of Charley (40 of 60 frames), as opposed to the present crisis and what had to be done. But in the end they let the filmmakers have their way, intending to commission a follow-up on “Clever Charley” that would include all of the information that they didn’t manage to get into this film.²³

The Board of Trade commented extensively on every single one of the 60 frames. Other than complaining about the excessive time spent on the historical dimension, their main concern was that “the historical treatment gives the impression that all our manufactures were exported. I don’t suppose that more than a quarter, at the very outside, was ever exported.” “This point,” the representative from the Board of Trade explained, “was of some publicity importance, because we know from our researches into public opinion that people have a very exaggerated idea of the proportion of our manufactures which we export, and this leads them to regard the export drive as making necessary a much greater diversion of supplies from the home market than is really the case.”²⁴ They did try to convince the filmmakers to add some historical details—like the importance of the Far East in the heyday of Charley’s power (which they had not included). But they also told the filmmakers what to omit. In every case, the final film reflects the decision to accept these suggestions. First, they were asked to leave out the musical accompaniment of “Yankee Doodle Dandy” at the point in the film where Charley gets help from his neighbor because, “It’s the whole western hemisphere, not just the U.S. providing aid.” Second, in the original treatment Charley apparently returned from his first foray abroad to trade with pots of sugar. Without any explanation, the recommendation was simply made to “suggest silk and spices for imports, not sugar.” Third, and again, without elaboration, a sequence was cut “which shows Charley as more comfortable than 90% of the other Islanders.”²⁵

After these many months of planning, writing, rewriting, and production, *Robinson Charley* was finally sent on the road with the exhibit “On Our Way,” to bring this inspiring story of Britain’s national past all over the country. After walking through a didactic, statistic-filled exhibit that explained what Britain was doing to meet its production and export goals industry by industry, visitors sat in a mobile cinema and were greeted by a government lecturer. Following a script provided by the COI, the lecturer enjoined his audience to consider the film they were about to see in light of their own,

very particular local industries, their own lives, and most important, the contributions they, as individuals, could make to the national recovery.²⁶ The visitors then sat and watched Robinson Charley—the carefully clad, accented character, fine-tuned to represent the average Briton—tell a reassuring and inspiring story for an audience facing the long, arduous road to economic recovery. Hard-working Charley, trucking-and-bartering Charley, ingenious, go-ahead trader Charley (with Mrs. Charley gamely by his side), had all the proclivities necessary to rebuild a wartorn Britain. And there was nothing in his history, or in the Atlantic world in which he made his fortune, to trouble anyone. There is absolutely no struggle in this story, for it had all been carefully excised. There was no trouble domestically. The story conveniently began in 1690, after the Glorious Revolution. There were no laborers other than Charley and his wife (90 percent of whom would have been less comfortable than Charley). Industrialization took place naturally, ineluctably, as paths transmuted into railroads, as one loom became a factory. Reduced working hours, like Charley's own prosperity, came not from striking, or organizing, or political action of any kind; they just happened. Nor was there any struggle globally, where empty continents, equipped with docks, simply waited to be improved by trader Charley; Africa, the Caribbean, and the slave trade (the entire Black Atlantic) were written out by the simple decision to replace sugar with spices. There is no state helping trader Charley enclose the land on his own island and make it his own, to establish his dominion over the seas, to secure his privileged trading position in the world, to set up his banks, insurance companies, or even the welfare state his first three films were dedicated to explaining.

Indeed, this Robinson Crusoe rewrite can be seen as the apotheosis of the tradition of Robinsonades to which Marx referred in 1859. Marx was not, in fact, referring to the original novel by Defoe. When he used the mocking term Robinsonade to describe the heroic narrative by which Europeans recounted and naturalized the progressive rise of capitalist civilization, he dated its origins not to Defoe's early eighteenth-century novel, but to the liberal political economists of the Enlightenment, who based their grandiose theories about society and civilization around the "insipid illusion" that at its center was an ineluctable tale of progress and evolution that began with "natural man." What Marx was railing against was the elevation of the "trucking and bartering" everyman, the "improving, property owner" into a product of nature rather than of history, the kind of "natural man" imagined in the treatises of John Locke and Adam Smith, rather than the hero of Defoe's novel. For

Defoe's hero had a history, and it was mired in the violence and exploitation of imperial conquest and slavery. Robinson Crusoe only landed on his deserted island because his frustration with the lack of sufficient unpaid labor on his plantation in Brazil led him to try his hand at the illegal slave trade. It is true that in his twenty-seven years on the deserted island he industriously developed a home and a summer estate, domesticated animals, raised crops, and manufactured clothes and pottery. And it is also true that no matter what happened to Robinson Crusoe—and lots of bad things happened—he was able to turn a profit at every turn. But the hero was wracked by guilt about his ambitions. He constantly drew attention to the problematic conquest of America by competing European empires. He reflected on the ways religions (especially Catholicism) justified violent exploitation. In short, this complex, one could even argue ironic portrait of “economic man” making his fortune in the violent, exploitive world of the Atlantic slave trade was not the script Mr. Tritton had in mind when he suggested, “It could be done beautifully by Charley!”²⁷ Tritton, the members of the Film Division, and the filmmakers were drawing on a complex tradition, consolidated since the late eighteenth century, of spinning “Robinson-Crusoe-like nursery tales” about the origins and progress of Western civilization, *Robinsonades* that explicitly left out all the violence and struggle still present in Defoe's novel. These proliferated in Marx's century—in the treatises of political economy that he cited, but also in the widely read *Robinson Crusoe* rewrites that were ever more triumphal, ever more legitimizing of European conquest as the century wore on. These Robinsonades were elevated into official history when they became the organizing script behind the Great Exhibitions of the nineteenth century, the world fairs by which Europe (and by the twentieth century) America put themselves forward as the vanguard of civilization, the endpoint toward which everyone should want to go.²⁸

Robinson Charley was designed as an entertaining, amusing alternative to the consistently grim story that comprised Britain's information campaign in general, an effort to reassure a public tired of austerity, tired of rationing, who believed they were working overtime for lower wages only to export everything they made. It was also designed to reassure a public that in spite of their severe losses in the last war, in spite of the fact that the far-flung empire was crumbling, in spite of the apparent power and wealth of America (their rich neighbor Sam), Britain had the resources to reclaim its natural position of leadership in the world. In a context in which the United States was providing assistance for a European-wide recovery and requiring, as a condition of

that aid, that recipients spend five cents of every Marshall dollar on an information campaign advertising that assistance, *Robinson Charley* also captures the proud, independent posture the British government consistently adopted in relation to the United States, Europe, and the story of the Atlantic being negotiated through the European-wide recovery.

Like their counterparts in London, government information officers all over Western Europe commissioned journalists, photographers, artists, filmmakers, and specialists in exhibitions during the four-year tenure of the Marshall Plan (1948–1952) to explain, to visualize, to enact the recovery their populations were experiencing. As in Britain, they seized this opportunity, with the encouragement and assistance of their American benefactors, to reach back into the past to find legitimating, inspiring, usable narratives to guide their citizens toward a desirable future. Everywhere this gave rise to Atlantic dreaming, a tendency to recast the Atlantic as the crucible of civilization, a civilization founded on the basis of the division of labor, on the promise of the trucking and bartering “Jack-of-all-trades” proposed by Balfour, and transformed by Halas and Batchelor (with the blessing of the Economic Information Unit) into *Robinson Charley*.²⁹ Nowhere else in the European-wide recovery have I found a *Robinsonade* to rival *Robinson Charley* in its explicit reworking of *Robinson Crusoe*; but everywhere I found information officers scouring the wreck that was postwar Europe to find usable building blocks of civilization, on which to tell stories about its past, and in the process to extol, above all, the history of *doux* or gentle commerce that held the key to curing all that ailed a war-ravaged Europe.

Robinsonades in the Recovery

Like Defoe’s hero, who took thirteen trips back to his shipwrecked slaving vessel to gather what he could to rebuild a life on his solitary island, information officers combed through the rubble that was Europe to find what could be salvaged after almost a decade of barbarism and destruction. Indeed, in “Gateway to Germany,” a pamphlet produced by the Marshall Plan Ministry in West Germany, the population and its circumstances after 1945 were described in precisely these terms. “A mighty ship had foundered, the crew had salvaged nothing. The German people had become a nation of castaways and the fatherland an island of despair. . . . Millions of hungry Robinson Crusoes went about their tasks clothed in rags, and performed the most difficult, back-breaking work without proper tools. . . . And at

their sides stood ‘Man Friday’—in the person of the tireless, over-worked German woman.³⁰ But in Germany it was not Robinson Crusoe who was the star of the recovery, but the hard-working Lockean, Smithian everyman, another version of Balfour’s Mr. Jack-of-all-trades, devoted to the improvement of his property. “For a time it seemed as though this country’s will to live had been broken, her culture and historical countenance blotted out. . . . But despite all this, the German people did not give up. One of their strongest traits, an almost fanatic reverence for toil, is probably what saved them. They had lost everything—except the property rights to the rubble which had once comprised their homes and shops.”³¹

The information campaign narrating the recovery in West Germany celebrated real, rather than fictive, Germans for their maniacal devotion to labor and their tireless energy for rebuilding. Photo essays such as the one featuring the auto worker Peter Kohlmann of Russelsheim brought newspaper readers into the life of a typical worker, toiling eight hours at the factory (in this case, the Opel Plant, owned by General Motors), riding his bicycle home from work, then spending many hours rebuilding his prewar home that had been destroyed by bombs.³² The 1951 German barge exhibit that traveled by river around West Germany featured a husband and wife, Hans and Gretel, in a similar story, building their own home, helping revive all the industries necessary to build the foundation and the walls, to install electricity and plumbing, to furnish and decorate, and finally to provide entertainment.³³ *Me and Mr. Marshall*, a short film produced in 1949, focused on a miner who moved far from his family to volunteer in this most essential of industries, to help jumpstart not only Germany’s but also Europe’s recovery. Rebuilding was the most important rite of the recovery in Germany. Nowhere in ERP Europe was the act of transforming rubble into roads, into factories, into housing projects, nowhere were the before-and-after photographs that became shorthand for “the recovery is underway” more necessary and more ubiquitous than in Germany. For every finished building and every commodity that rolled off the conveyer belt was testimony to the rehabilitated, revitalized liberal laboring subject who was behind it all. “Notice the energy applied to re-create their country from out of the ruins and rubble,” concluded *Gateway to Germany*. “Then you will discover Germany in a different way.”³⁴

Everywhere the vital role of “help from America” in Germany’s recovery was touted, not as in Britain, as a temporary stopgap, but as deep nourishment necessary for the recovery. In Germany, unlike in Britain, the red,

white, and blue emblem of the ERP was ubiquitous—on every factory and housing complex rebuilt with Marshall dollars, on every railway car, and on every commodity arriving from America and produced in Germany with the help of Marshall money.³⁵ If the film *The Air of Freedom* could present Berlin in 1950—the capital of the Third Reich a mere five years earlier—as the host of a world fair, capable of standing in as “a showcase on Western Civilization,” it was because only two years into the recovery, information officers felt confident that they had saved the average German from the allures of both fascism and communism by channeling his prodigious energy into laboring—to rebuild his own house, brick by brick, to mine the coal necessary to fuel Germany’s and Europe’s recovery, to provide the financial foundation for a stable, prosperous, and free Europe. The Atlantic was Germany’s lifeline, the source of its nourishment and rehabilitation. Nowhere was this point made more vividly than in the exhibit that traveled around Germany in 1949 and 1950; the exhibit recounting the story of Germany’s national recovery was mounted around a 12.5-meter long, 5.5-meter wide, 1.3-meter deep basin including a relief map of the Atlantic. It took 20–25 men 18 days of continuous work just to mount this “mobile” exhibit.³⁶

As in Britain, and unlike in Germany, France had a long and usable past that could be selectively tapped as its government enjoined its citizens to cooperate and work hard to ensure their national recovery. And it was a past that involved France’s own participation in creating a nourishing, civilized, and productive Atlantic. The French story of the development of the Atlantic emphasized the wonders of technology, scientific development, and a selective set of ideals that bequeathed a legacy of social democracy and reform, not of revolution (especially not communist revolution). Just as the Economic Information Unit rewrote the economic and political history of Britain since 1690 as a triumphant story shorn of all violence, exploitation, and political struggle, the fledgling Fourth Republic leapt handily over the recent Vichy interlude and offered a cleaned-up version of both colonialism and its own domestic history of industrialization and political struggle.

Transatlantique, a film produced by French directors André Sarrut and Jacques Asseo in 1953 for the Ministry of Finance and the ERP administrators in Paris, typifies the triumphant narrative regarding the development of the French Atlantic that served as a foundation for the French recovery. Just as the engineer hero replaced Daniel Defoe’s merchant trader in Jules Verne’s 1867 *Robinson Crusoe* rewrite, *The Mysterious Island*, and the Great Exhibitions across the nineteenth century in Paris celebrated the history of

France and its empire as a consequence of technological and commercial progress, *Transatlantique* told the story of the discovery of America by adventurous explorers, and its development by successive technological innovations that brought North America and Europe into closer circulation and communication. The history of the Atlantic recounted in *Transatlantique* begins in 1492, with Christopher Columbus explaining to disbelieving crowds that the earth was round. The multitudes laughed, but Spain's king and queen believed him and sent three boats across the ocean. This virgin voyage was not easy: there were storms, men on board got sick; but here the hardships end. Columbus appeared happy when he sighted Native Americans on shore. The boat landed and, as in *Robinson Charley*, there was no conflict.

Europe, now portrayed with lots of eyes looking on, sent more and more ships, bearing the Union Jack and the colors of the French, Spanish, and Dutch; they each set up their own communities. Individuals were shown meeting, smoking, and talking amicably with Native Americans with whom they got to work, felling trees and building homes. A brief period of turmoil ensued when the British crown demanded taxes: the crown fell, the liberty bell rang, and its peal was heard across the ocean in France, where the Marseillaise played, the French king was deposed, and *Liberté, Egalité, and Fraternité* were proclaimed for all, marking the heyday of the age of the Atlantic Revolutions.

The British Isles were at the center of the story for the Industrial Revolution. Here we have Robinson Charley's nineteenth century in fast motion: locomotives and steam ships proliferated, boats tugged the continents closer together. Planes appeared and a man in Kansas and people in Paris looked up and waved as the continents drew closer together still. New York and Paris were connected by telephone; newspapers with headlines in German, French, and English circulated between the continents. Architectural plans, manufacturing plans—ideas hatched in Europe—turned into machines and products in factories in America. Going back and forth from continent to continent, a man chopped down a tree on one side of the Atlantic, matchsticks appeared in a box on the other; a scientist used a matchstick to light a Bunsen burner on one side, a vaccine was sent to a doctor on the other, the doctor gave a shot to a pianist, who played his music on one side of the Atlantic while a woman, sewing, listened to the radio on the other. A ballerina leaped across the ocean, followed by more and more people, as the ocean gap closed until the final frame, where several sets of hands from either side of the Atlantic met in a

handshake, one of which—and for the first time signaling the existence of a Black Atlantic—was black.³⁷

France, in fact, was given a starring role in the ERP. Paris housed its bureaucratic headquarters since the program's inception in 1948. But it was in 1951 that Paris became its symbolic center when it launched the Europe Train. This was a traveling exhibit that was the culmination of three years of experiments explaining and narrating the recovery, three years of re-imagining the past and the future in light of the extraordinary accomplishments of the present. Workers laid tracks for the Europe Train on the Esplanade des Invalides, in sight of the Gare d'Orsay, Grand Palais, Petit Palais, and Eiffel Tower, monuments to the repeated efforts by the French governments of 1855, 1867, 1889, and 1900 to use the framework of the Great Industrial Exhibition to define France's power and place in the world. In 1951, inaugurated by the Republican Guard, in a ceremony that featured every dignitary involved in the ERP, France used these very same fairgrounds to present itself as the symbolic capital of a new postwar Europe, redefined as a result of the recovery.³⁸

The exhibit inaugurated on the Place des Invalides on October 13, 1951, was contained in a train comprised of eight cars.³⁹ If October 13, 1951, was its official international ceremonial opening, the train had in fact been circulating around Europe since the previous spring. The train was adapted for viewing as it wended its way around Europe: the language of the displays was changed, the fifth car was completely re-outfitted to tell the local, national story of the country it was visiting.⁴⁰ But everything else remained the same: the other seven cars, the entertainments, the maps, the basic story of Europe. And that was essential, because the train itself was designed to enact the story it was telling; the fact that visitors from "free Europe" were experiencing the same exhibit was part and parcel of the process of constituting the very thing the train was celebrating. When visitors walked onto the train and saw the map of "free Europe," what they saw was the blinking lights indicating the past and future itinerary of the train itself.⁴¹ The first car presented the Europe that was coming together as a result of the recovery. The second car celebrated the products of that cooperation, literally, one commodity at a time. This car was one enormous elegy to the productivity, power, and superiority of Europe now that it was cooperating. Car 3 explained this stunning productivity by the bureaucratic structures that had been managing its cooperation since 1948. The eighteen participants in the Organization for European Economic Cooperation (OEEC) are represented again and again:

in maps, in headshots of their leaders, in complex diagrams outlining their organization.

But it was in the fourth car—the literal heart of the eight-car exhibit—that the nourishing role of the Atlantic was enacted. The words at the entrance to the car read, “Europe once again stands, with its North American partners across the Atlantic as two continents, but one civilization . . . 275,000,000 Europeans and 163,000,000 Americans and Canadians are united in their ideas, their cultures, their economy.” “Two continents, one civilization” is depicted in a mechanical device that transforms an image of two hands clasped into a map of Europe and North America united, as the following ten posters explain, by exchanges of scientific information, films and theater troops, students, literature, and art.⁴² But dominating this fourth car is the moving model of the North Atlantic basin that occupied one full wall.⁴³ The flickering lights representing traffic and communication between the two continents, by air and by plane by cable and by radio, picked up on the leitmotif of the circulation that defined the map of Europe at the entryway. In the center of the map was a screen on which was projected a slide show, enumerating the principal items of trade, as well as statistics on vital commodities produced and exchanged by the twenty countries. If the car representing the productivity of Europe seemed impressive to the visitors, it was nothing compared to the staggering statistics representing Europe and North America’s joint output: 45 percent of the world’s wheat, 79 percent of its steel, 71 percent of its cotton, wool and rayon, 77 percent of its electricity, 71 percent of its coal, 73 percent of its petroleum, 90 percent of its automobiles, and 83 percent of boats for shipping. The Atlantic car ended with a poster reiterating the message at its entryway, “275,000,000 Europeans + 163,000,000 Americans and Canadians belong to the community of free peoples,” and a recorded voice directly addressed the visitor: “You too are a part of this grand community of free peoples.”

Atlantic History in and Beyond the Crucible of the Recovery

When George Marshall gave his speech at Harvard in June 1947 announcing the aid package that would bear his name, the logic for *Robinson Charley*, “Transatlantique,” and the stunning story of “Two Continents, One Civilization” celebrated in the Atlantic car of the Europe Train was already in evidence. After a brief overview of the destruction and dislocation produced by ten years in which all existing political, economic, and military institutions

were turned to support the German war machine, he asked his audience to consider what was necessary to “rehabilitate Europe.” He offered his answer in a long, telling, but rarely quoted paragraph:

The farmer has always produced the foodstuffs to exchange with the city dweller for the other necessities of life. This division of labor is the basis of modern civilization. At the present time it is threatened with breakdown. The town and city industries are not producing adequate goods to exchange with the food-producing farmer. Raw materials and fuel are in short supply. Machinery is lacking or worn out. The farmer or the peasant cannot find the goods for sale which he desires to purchase. So the sale of his farm produce for money which he cannot use seems to him an unprofitable transaction. He, therefore, has withdrawn many fields from crop cultivation and is using them for grazing. He feeds more grain to stock and finds for himself and his family an ample supply of food, however short he may be on clothing and the other ordinary gadgets of civilization. Meanwhile people in the cities are short of food and fuel [and in some places approaching the starvation level—oral addition]. So the governments are forced to use their foreign money and credits to procure these necessities abroad. This process exhausts funds which are urgently needed for reconstruction. Thus a very serious situation is rapidly developing which bodes no good for the world. The modern system of the division of labor upon which the exchange of products is based is in danger of breaking down.

The remedy lies in breaking the vicious circle and restoring the confidence of the European people in the economic future of their own countries and of Europe as a whole. The manufacturer and the farmer throughout wide areas must be able and willing to exchange their product for currencies the continuing value of which is not open to question.⁴⁴

Marshall did not cite John Locke or Adam Smith that day, but recognizable in his speech to anyone familiar with European intellectual history is the idealist, positive portrait of the civilizing spirit of capitalism that by the end of the eighteenth century had begun to gain traction and popularity.

No one has done more to help us appreciate the “arguments for capitalism before its triumph” that emerged in the eighteenth century than the scholar

Albert O. Hirschman. In his 1977 *Passions and the Interests*, he recounts the process by which theorists (most importantly, Adam Smith) began to enumerate the many ways in which “interests” (to make profits) could serve as an effective bridle upon the infinitely more dangerous “passions” (for conquest, for power, for domination).⁴⁵ If these new arguments in favor of the civilizing potential of *doux* (or gentle) commerce became widespread in the late eighteenth century as a response to the violence of the wars of religion and imperial conquest of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it is hardly surprising that the barbarism of Europe in the twentieth century would lead to an analogous quest for a utopian future on the foundation of state-sponsored *doux commerce*. Nor is it surprising that Hirschman would have been attuned to the deep historical antecedents of this idea, given that he was, himself, a Marshall planner.

In the decade after World War II, the eighteenth-century idea of *doux commerce* was re-invented and re-imagined as the antidote and cure for the horrors perpetrated in the heart of civilized Europe in the twentieth century. That was clear in Marshall’s speech. It was certainly clear in the information campaign I have described in this chapter. “Restoring faith in the division of labor as the foundation of civilization” required a massive rewriting of European history, one that information officers situated within an Atlantic frame. The Atlantic that was narrated and performed to serve the Recovery all over Western Europe between 1948 and 1952, and to testify to the promise of *doux commerce*, was emptied of conquest and slavery, of imperial wars and national competition, of racism and authoritarianism.

The early practitioners of Atlantic history, I would argue—emphasizing as they did the commercial and administrative networks that tied the Americas to Europe, the Atlantic Revolutions, and the enlightened ideas that would ultimately flower into the democracies of North and South America—were likewise operating under the impulse to “rescue” the best of Western civilization after its most recent bloody catastrophe in Europe.⁴⁶ It would take decades for historians to challenge the Robinsonade version of the Atlantic, dictated by faith in “the division of labor as the foundation of civilization.” Many of the historians who did so were, not surprisingly, Marxists, but they were also historians of those islands in “Robinson Charley” equipped with docks, just waiting for Europeans to arrive, as well as the islands not represented (in particular, Africa). They were also social historians interested in the resident “islanders” necessarily omitted from the Recovery’s Atlantic: Africans, South Americans, natives of the Caribbean, and, in the United

States, African Americans and Native Americans. They were historians who rewrote the economic history of the early modern period, directing our attention away from the “center” (Europe and America) to the “periphery” (the rest of the Atlantic, but also the rest of the world).

“Rehabilitating Europe” in the Marshall era produced the Atlantic Civilization still celebrated in Bailyn’s volume. While Bailyn has incorporated much of the research on the slave trade, the “periphery,” and most important, “the authorized violence without restraint, scorched-earth campaigns, the exuberant desecration of symbols of civility,”⁴⁷ into this account, because of his emphasis on the “flow of ideas that permeated the Atlantic communities” during the age of Atlantic Revolutions, he still concludes on a mildly optimistic note. “It is this—the fusion of exploitative economic force, ruthless but ingenious, oppressive but creative, and the shared idealism of the Enlightenment—that is the ultimate and permanent legacy of Atlantic history in the early modern years.”⁴⁸

More recently, however, Atlantic historians have moved in the direction of challenging this broader narrative. Just as postcolonial historians are explicitly questioning the basic progressive narrative against which everyone outside the West measures itself by “provincializing Europe,”⁴⁹ Atlantic historians are rethinking the fundamentals of the story they tell about the past, in a way that acknowledges a very different legacy.

Richard Drayton offers a lovely formulation that I think demonstrates this turn in Atlantic history. Whereas the early decades of Atlantic history were still dominated by what he calls the “imperialism of the division of labor . . . an imperialism driven by those who understood themselves as cosmopolitans, and as the diffusers of universal progress,” more recent Atlantic historians have tried to write a history that elucidates the “collaboration of labor.”⁵⁰ Thinking of the “collaboration of labor” instead of the “division of labor” as that which defined the history of the past four centuries would be a very different spin on the Atlantic Car in the Europe Train of 1951. Instead of a representation of how “civilized” America and Europe were because of their staggering monopoly on productivity in the postwar world, instead of thinking of European and American development as a model of civilization toward which the world should orient itself, we would think of “how what we now call Europe, Africa, the Americas, and Asia were constructed together in the midst of a relationship, at once economic and cultural, military and political, that tended and still tends to allocate to the West a disproportionate share of the power to command and consume resources.”⁵¹ To tell *that* story

requires a very different conception of the Atlantic than was possible in the immediate aftermath of World War II. This volume, dedicated to writing a history of the Black Atlantic, one complicated, nonmythological biography at a time, focusing precisely on what was written out of the idyllic Atlantic world in which Robinson Charley made his fortune, testifies to the degree to which Atlantic historians are moving beyond the *Robinsonades* born in the crucible of the Recovery.

