[Anne Pimplott Baker. (2002). Refs. Walter Hines Page, The Pilgrims of Great Britain: A Centennial History, ISBN 1-86197-290-3, pp. 16,19,31,99. London: Profile Books.]

THE PILGRIMS OF GREAT BRITAIN

A CENTENNIAL HISTORY

Lord Carrington (President of the Pilgrims), HM The Queen (Patron) and Robert Worcester (Chairman) at the Pilgrims reception at St James's Palace on 22 June 1994.

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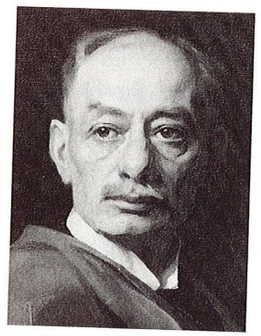
Anne Pimlott Baker

PROFILE BOOKS

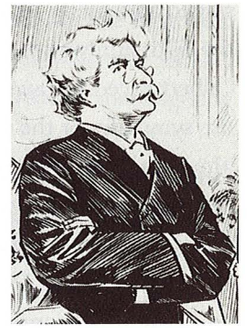
Despite Harry Brittain's claim that the Pilgrims did not intend to confine themselves to entertainment alone, the next ten years saw many splendid dinners and lunches, sometimes at the Carlton Hotel or Claridge's, but usually at the Savoy Hotel, especially after the opening of the new ballroom and banqueting hall (later called the Lancaster ballroom) in 1910. From its opening in 1889 the Savoy had always attracted American visitors, drawn by the prospect of American food and comforts, and other American societies in London, such as the American Society and the American Luncheon Club, always met there. During the First World War the Savoy became a centre of American activity, and it was the headquarters of the committee of Americans resident in London. Thanks to Harry Brittain's skilful use of his own contacts with the press (he was a friend of Lord Northcliffe, and organised the first Imperial Press Conference in 1909), and the number of leading newspaper editors and proprietors who were Pilgrims, every event had full press coverage. The speeches at the banquets were quoted in full in *The Times,* together with lists of the most illustrious guests, and full-page drawings appeared from time to time in the *Illustrated London News* and the *Daily Graphic.* London correspondents were understandably eager to secure tickets to Pilgrims functions, and in return reported that a particular event had attracted an even more glittering group of people than the last, and reinforced the Pilgrims' own assertion that they were the leading dining club in London. After the dinner to welcome Walter Hines Page as American ambassador in 1913, the *Observer* correspondent wrote: 'the after-dinner oratory of The Pilgrims is always unmatched . . . They gather at their banquet all that is best and noblest in the public life of the two great nations.' As Harry Brittain was careful always to keep prospective members on a waiting list, on the grounds that a club without a waiting list was not worth joining, its reputation grew.[11]



Walter Hines Page

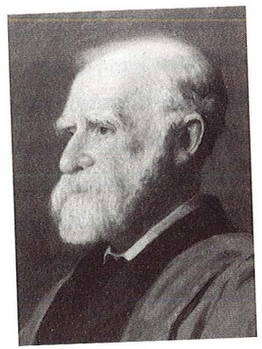
There were at least two dinners a year, sometimes three, and occasional lunches. The Pilgrims soon established the tradition that they should be the first to entertain the new American ambassador to Britain, and that his first official speech in England should be at this Pilgrims dinner. They also gave a send-off to each new British ambassador departing for Washington, and welcomed him back after his tour of duty. The American Pilgrims established a similar tradition. Harry Brittain and his

successors were careful to reinforce this tradition at every opportunity, so that new ambassadors soon considered it *de rigueur* to make their first public appearance at a Pilgrims dinner, and made sure they arranged their social schedules accordingly. As well as entertaining ambassadors, the Pilgrims kept a close eye on likely American visitors to London, in order to snap them up for a Pilgrims dinner.[12] When Mark Twain came to England in 1907 to receive an honorary degree from the University of Oxford, the Pilgrims were lucky to secure him for a lunch, as invitations poured in once it was known he was coming. In the days before there was a government hospitality department, the government found it very convenient to use the Pilgrims as a means of entertaining official visitors. The Pilgrims never confined themselves to Americans, but embraced all English-speaking peoples, and so were delighted to be asked to put on a banquet for the prime ministers of the Dominions, in London for the Colonial Conference in 1907, and again in 1911. If they were short of distinguished visitors, they could always entertain American embassy officials, as in 1905, when they arranged a farewell dinner for Henry Clay Evans, the American Consul-General, or great English statesmen, as in 1906, when they welcomed Lord Curzon on his arrival home from India at the end of his time as Viceroy. They did not always choose public figures, but gave lunches in 1912 for Ernest Thompson Seton, the naturalist, and Dr Wilfred Grenfell, founder of the Labrador Medical Mission.



Mark Twain

There were some signs that all these widely reported functions had had some effect on English attitudes to the United States: for example, in the 1912 edition of *Whitaker's Almanack,* the USA was moved out of alphabetical order to a special place ahead of other foreign countries, and immediately after the countries of the British Empire. The formation of the British Peace Centenary Committee in 1911, to plan the celebration in 1914 of one hundred years of peace between the two nations, won far more support than its counterpart in the United States: when it was suggested that a statue of Queen Victoria be raised in Central Park, New York, Theodore Roosevelt warned that it would provide steady occupation for the police force in protecting it from being blown up by the Irish. But as James Bryce pointed out in his speech to the Pilgrims on his return from Washington in 1913, American attitudes to the British were friendlier than they had been.[13]


Lord Bryce

The outbreak of war against Germany in August 1914 put an end to the Pilgrims banquets, but there were several meetings in 1915 and 1916, beginning with an impassioned address by Sir Gilbert Parker, MP, on 15 April 1915, the 50th anniversary of the death of Abraham Lincoln. Sir Gilbert urged his audience to understand that Britain had the sympathy of the vast majority of the American people: 'the American government is neutral, but millions of Americans abandoned their personal neutrality from the first week of the war'. There were talks, by the writer Hilaire Belloc on "The Present Phase of the War" on 30 June 1915; Maître Gaston de Leval, a Belgian lawyer and adviser to the US Legation in Brussels, on "Life in Belgium" on 26 January 1916; and William Hughes, Prime Minister of Australia, on "Australia and the War" on 17 March 1916. Harry Brittain also arranged for a selection of American newspapers to be laid out in a room on the ground floor of the Savoy Hotel, next to the Pilgrims office, so that Pilgrims could keep in touch with the American perspective on the war. There was one lunch, for James Montgomery Beck, Assistant Attorney-General of the United States from 1900 to 1903, on 5 July 1916. James Beck, author of *The Evidence in the Case* (1914), one of the most widely read books on the causes of the war and the reasons why Britain was fighting, and one of the leading American speakers in the cause of the Allies, came to England at the invitation of the Pilgrims. He told his audience that the Americans were loyal to the empire of English-speaking peoples, and urged them that 'the great Empire of the English-speaking race' must stand firm. After this he accompanied Harry Brittain to the battlefields of France.[14]

The United States maintained its isolationist policy through most of the war, and it was not until German submarines began to sink American ships that the American people were ready to go to war. The United States declared war on Germany on 3 April 1917, to the intense relief of the British people. American flags were hoisted over hotels, theatres, shops and private houses, and for the first time in history the British and American flags flew side by side over the House of Commons. The Pilgrims decided to welcome the American entry into the war with a banquet at the Savoy on 12 April 1917, its first banquet for three years. There were so many applications that they filled the Banqueting Hall and the

White Room, and there were still over 150 on the waiting list. The Foreign Secretary, Arthur Balfour, an old friend of Joseph Choate and himself a Pilgrim, presided. Walter Hines Page, the American ambassador, the guest of honour, told the Pilgrims that the United States had entered a European war for the first time in its history: 'we are come to save our own honour and to uphold our ideals'. Four days later, on 16 April, many Pilgrims attended the service of thanksgiving for America's entry into the war, in St Paul's Cathedral.

The American Officers' Club, at first called the Pilgrims War Club, was another of Harry Brittain's projects. He was not unaware of the publicity value to the Pilgrims of setting up a club for American officers in London. He was worried that the Pilgrims Society had been out of the public eye since the beginning of the war, and that new clubs were springing up and encroaching on the Pilgrims' membership and ideas. The American Luncheon Club, for example, met weekly in the same room that the Pilgrims had used at the Savoy, and had adopted the Pilgrims' idea of sitting around round tables, and another rival was the Empire Parliamentary Association, which entertained distinguished visitors from overseas and had begun to "annex" those from the United States. Rather than compete for leading visitors, Harry Brittain decided it was essential for the Pilgrims to strike a new line, and for the rest of the war the main activity of the British Pilgrims was concentrated on the American Officers' Club.[15] Set up under the auspices of the Pilgrims, at 9 Chesterfield Gardens, Curzon Street, the town house of Lord Leconfield, who lent it to the Pilgrims for the duration of the war, the American Officers' Club, described by the *Daily Express* as the most sumptuous club in the world, offered all the amenities of an American club, complete with an American bar, to all American army and navy officers in London. Seen as a gift from the British to the Americans, the club levied no subscription from the American officers, who were automatically members, and all Pilgrims were encouraged to join – and most did – at an annual subscription of £5 a year, and to lunch and dine there regularly. The club, run by an executive committee chaired by Harry Brittain, with the help of John Wilson Taylor, chairman of the house committee, opened on 24 October 1917, with its official opening by the Duke of Connaught on 20 November. There was an

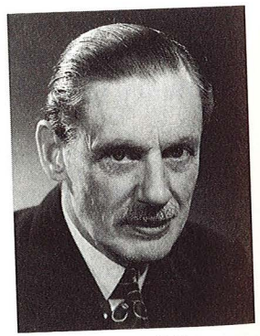

Prince Arthur, Duke of Connaught


George Marshall

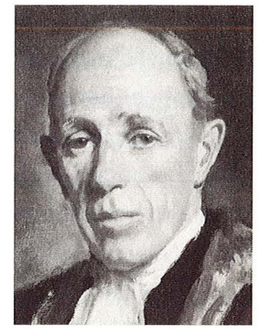
relationship" and a "natural relationship", regarding the relationship between Britain and the United States as the latter: 'There is no more natural relationship in international life than that between the United States and the British Commonwealth. This relationship requires no special political initiative. It is not embodied in any formal treaty or pact.'

These dinners, and those of the 1950s, led Lord Halifax, president of the Pilgrims from 1950 to 1958, to state in his memoirs, *Fulness of Days* (1957), that the main activity of the Society was to entertain and provide a platform for distinguished Americans when they visited Britain, but to the outside world the most important thing the Pilgrims did in these years was to initiate and take charge of the erecting of the Franklin Roosevelt Memorial in Grosvenor Square.

It was Sir Campbell Stuart, a member of the Pilgrims executive committee since 1919, who suggested the idea to Lord Derby. Sir Campbell was experienced in the matter of setting up statues: he had chaired a committee of the Canadian History Society which erected a statue of General Wolfe at Greenwich in 1930, and also sat on the Mansion House committee which raised money for a memorial to King George V, taking over the chairmanship from Attlee in 1945.[44] The scheme was launched at the dinner for Eleanor Roosevelt in February 1946, when a letter from Lord Derby was read out. Ever since President Roosevelt's death in April 1945, suggestions for a memorial had been pouring into the government and had been aired in the press, including a proposal to name the new airport at Staines (the present Heathrow Airport) "Port Roosevelt", as thousands of Americans would make their first landing in England there. The two main alternatives appeared to be a hospital specialising in infantile paralysis (polio) and a statue, and although at first the government intended to take charge of the project, which would be paid for out of public funds, in the end they decided to let the Pilgrims go ahead and do all the organisation themselves. The Pilgrims set up a committee, chaired by Lord Greenwood, and soon settled on a statue, to be placed in Grosvenor


Sir Campbell Stuart

Square, because of its long associations with the United States: John Adams, the first American minister to Britain, from 1786 to 1788, and later second President of the United States, lived there, as did Walter Hines Page, the American ambassador at the time of the First World War. During the Second World War John Winant lived in a flat in the embassy, and it was the centre for the American armed forces. The Duke of Westminster, who owned the land, agreed to give it to the nation, and the Prime Minister steered a special Act of Parliament through the House of Commons, because of the law safeguarding open spaces in London, while the residents gave up their exclusive rights to the use of the garden. Introducing the bill, in October 1946, the Prime Minister said of Roosevelt:

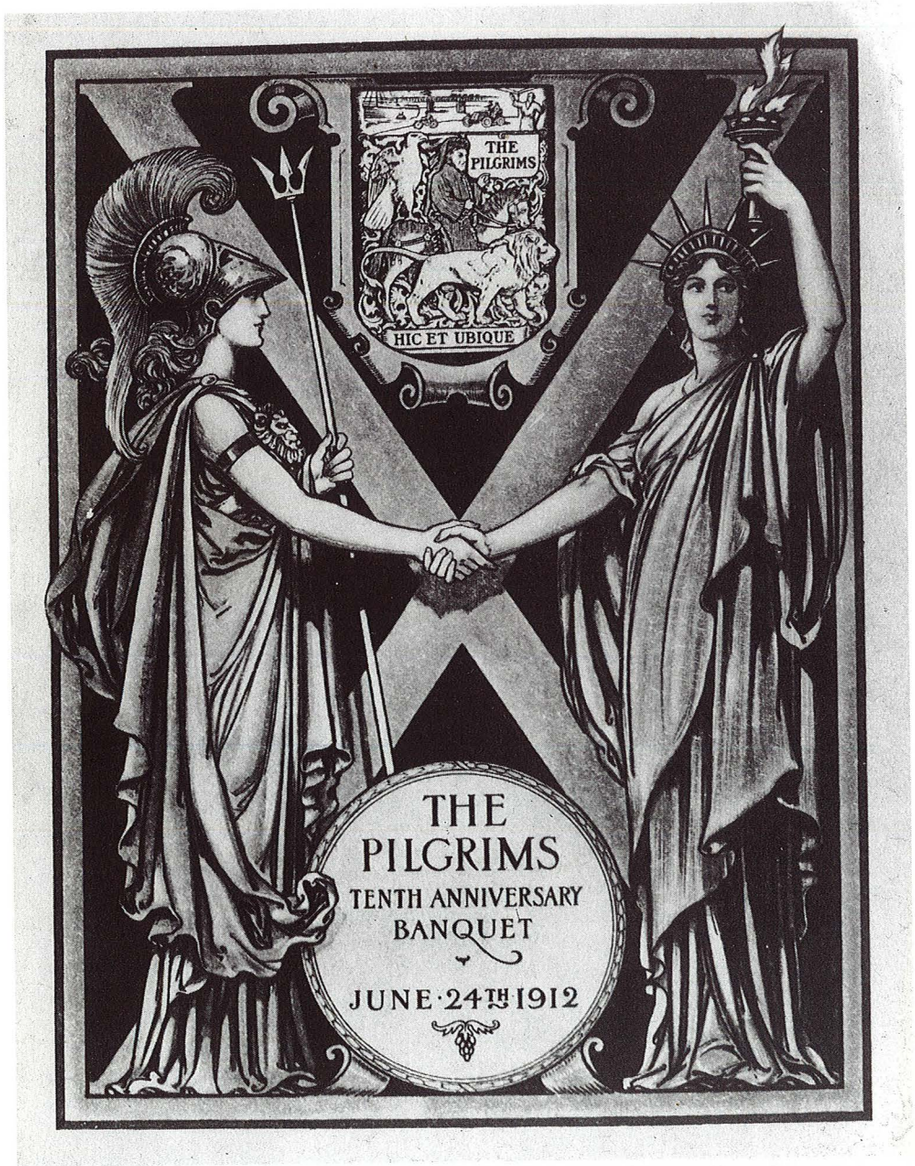

Lord Halifax

> 'Here, in this House today, we think of him mainly as a great upholder of freedom and democracy, and as the loyal and true friend of this country. No one saw more clearly than did he that our fight against Hitlerism was a fight for freedom all over the world, and he recognised that in the dark days of 1940, Britain was holding the outpost line of liberty before that realisation had come to many of his countrymen.'

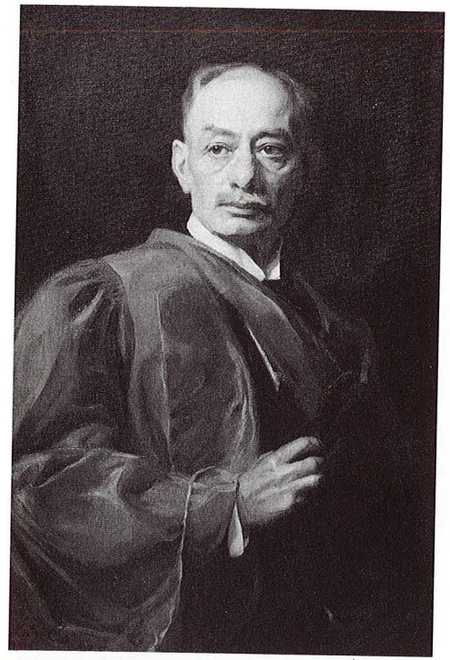
Supporting the bill, Winston Churchill said:

> 'Of Roosevelt, however, it must be said that had he not acted when he did, in the way he did, had he not felt the generous surge of freedom in his heart, had he not resolved to give aid to Britain and Europe in the supreme crisis through which we have passed, a hideous fate might well have overwhelmed mankind and made its whole future for centuries sink into shame and ruin. It may well be that the man whom we honour today not only anticipated history but altered its course, and altered it in a manner which has saved the freedom and earned the gratitude of the human race for generations to come.'

The committee asked Sir William Reid Dick, RA, to make the statue: it was he who had made the statue of George V, and his statue of David Livingstone at Victoria Falls was also well known. After much controversy over whether it should be a sitting



The menu cover for the tenth anniversary banquet, attended by 350 British and American Pilgrims. One of the speakers, Herbert Samuel, Postmaster-General, after stressing the importance of good dinners for promoting friendship, told the Pilgrims that the link that bound Britain and the United States more than any other was the Postmaster-General.



Left *Walter Hines Page, American ambassador to Britain from 1913 to 1918. A journalist from North Carolina, founder and editor of the* World's Work, *he was convinced that peace depended on the co-operation of England and the United States, the two great Anglo-Saxon nations. He was a passionate supporter of Britain during the First World War, and opposed President Woodrow Wilson's neutrality policy.*

Right *The guest list for the lunch to welcome the British polo team back from America. The captain of the team, Lord Wimborne, was a Pilgrim. The first sporting function held by the Pilgrims, a lunch for the American polo team which had just won the International Cup, was in 1909. Sporting lunches and dinners continued up to the Second World War, and included dinners for athletic teams from Harvard and Yale, Cornell and Princeton, the Columbia University rowing crew, and a team of American golfers. When it was suggested in 1950 that the Pilgrims hold a dinner for the visiting athletics teams from Princeton and Cornell, Sir Campbell Stuart ruled that the English-Speaking Union would be more appropriate, as times had changed. Again, in 1970, there was a suggestion that the Pilgrims should hold receptions for American sportsmen visiting England to take part in Wimbledon, Henley and the Open golf championships, but this was not acted upon.*

WELCOME HOME to the British Polo Team upon their return from America, by the Pilgrims, at the Savoy Hotel, Thursday, July 2nd, 1914