IN January 1994 the British Library purchased a copy of Wyndham Lewis's political pamphlet Anglosaxony: A League that Works (shelfmark: Cup.410.f.419). Published 30 June 1941 in Toronto by the Ryerson Press in an edition of 1500 and priced at 75 cents, 310 copies were sold by February 1944. According to the publishers no record exists of the remaining 1190 copies and Lewis's biographer Jeffrey Meyers states that it 'may have been pulped – for it is now unobtainable'. No copy is known to exist in British libraries.

Wyndham Lewis (1888–1957) is generally regarded as one of the most important figures in the history of Modernism as novelist, social and cultural critic, painter and leader of the Vorticist movement. Of remote Canadian ancestry, he was born on his father’s yacht while it was in Canadian waters off Amherst, Nova Scotia. He retained his Canadian citizenship throughout his life, a factor which enabled him to leave England in 1939 and spend the war years in North America, where he believed he could earn more money than in England. A few days before leaving England he told Julian Symons that he ‘had seen Europe destroy itself in one war and had suffered through it, and that he had no intention of sitting through another’.

Lewis arrived in Toronto in September 1939 where he stayed until October. He then went to New York, where he hoped to sit out the hostilities, but when his American visa expired he was forced to return to Canada, exchanging a ‘stony desert’ for a ‘sanctimonious ice-box’. From November 1940 to June 1943 Lewis stayed at the Tudor Hotel in Toronto, the model for the Hotel Blundell in his 1954 novel Self Condemned, where Toronto is Momaco, a place 'so ugly, and so devoid of all character as of any trace of charm, that it was disagreeable to walk about in'. Until the end of the war he was chiefly in Windsor, Ontario, where he taught at Assumption College, and occasionally travelled across the border giving lectures in St Louis and Chicago.

Although he pictured himself as ‘an involuntary squatter in the Dominion of Canada’, and felt that his thirty years of creative achievement were ignored by Canadians, his international reputation and Canadian citizenship made him comparatively welcome. He lectured for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and wrote articles for Saturday Night. He was commissioned to paint numerous portraits as documented in the recent Art Gallery of Windsor exhibition catalogue ‘The Talented Intruder’: Wyndham Lewis in Canada, which concludes that he made about three times as much money during his Canadian years as the average Canadian worker.

Among the portraits he drew early in 1941 while in Toronto was an unsolicited sketch in crayon of Dr Lorne Pierce, the Editor-in-Chief of Ryerson Press (est. 1829). Pierce, who was told by Lewis that he looked like De Valera and Mephistopheles, was pleased with the result.
which Lewis said later that he 'had used... many times with prospective clients, and that it had brought him success.' The meeting led to a contract for a small propaganda pamphlet on the Commonwealth, namely Anglosaxony.

Lewis was very concerned about the title of the pamphlet, writing to Pierce on 31 May 1941 that 'the title of a book is important: ... I want this book to go into the shops and newsstands with a name that will help you to sell it.' He rejected titles such as Democracy and The Bulldog Breed preferring Pierce’s suggestion Anglosaxon Commonwealth: A League that Will Work. On 12 June 1941 he wrote to Pierce that the Ryerson preference A League that Works alone was 'rather like forcing Augustus to wear a top-hat – or dressing President Roosevelt up in one of Goering’s uniforms.' A compromise was reached with Lewis having the last word: 'as I wrote the book, you must allow me one letter of my own in the title: namely a Y.'

Lewis was as concerned about publicity as he was about the book’s title, suggesting reviewers such as his friend Alice Roosevelt Longworth, who would be made very angry by it ‘because she loathes Democracy and all its works!’, and Edmund Wilson ‘who is so fond of Marx he cant [sic] see the point of anything else, but who would review it.’ But all his concern could not help the book from falling completely flat. For Lewis the chief reason for this was that the book was published, not in London or New York, but in Toronto. He believed Canadians asked each other about ‘a visitor like myself, from another planet... “What the heck is he doing here”.’ For just as there is something degrading about a book having itself brought out here, so there is presumably something degrading about being here.

The book he had brought out, in which ‘much of the argument has a validity beyond the special pleading of the moment’, is important today chiefly as an insight into Lewis’s political ideas at the time of World War II. Before the war Lewis had shown sympathy for fascism in his 1926 work The Art of Being Ruled (‘I am not a communist; if anything I favour some form of fascism rather than communism’) and been grouped by T. S. Eliot with a number of writers who ‘incline in the direction of some kind of fascism’. He had also written two books about Hitler, which many believed meant that he supported him. In a footnote in his autobiography he was to write as follows about them in response to a comment by George Orwell in the Partisan Review (Summer, 1946):

As to my books ‘in favour of Hitler’, I have written two books about Hitler, one when he first appeared on the scene... (in 1930) before he came to power and revealed what a lunatic he was, and the other (The Hitler Cult and How it Will End) at the time of Munich. The first book was ‘in favour’: though it was not the Nazi’s view of the matter; the second was very much the reverse of ‘in favour’.

The Hitler Cult is in many ways a rewriting of the earlier Hitler, with numerous points refuted which had been made on behalf of Hitler in the first book. The satirical America, I Presume, impressions of America published in New York in August 1940, reinforces this change of opinion by referring to Hitler as a ‘barbarous little mountebank’. In the same book Lewis expressed a view which is one of the main themes of Anglosaxony, namely that whatever happened during the present war – whether or not America would enter it – ‘it is of vast importance that the English-speaking peoples of the world should act in harmony’.

Anglosaxony is written in three parts. The first, entitled Democracy and Fascism, is a defence of the democratic ideal against criticisms from both Right and Left. Lewis stresses that he sees democracy as a ‘limited, an Anglo-Saxon family affair’ but he does not mean to give democracy a nationalist character. Instead he envisages it as one only among
several ways of life and not as a political system ‘desirous of imposing itself upon all and sundry’.20 He also believes that a democratic shake-up of the social structure is possible in Britain which would enable the best brains to function freely and no longer be stifled by the mediocrity of the ‘vulgar and purposeless luxuriance of the middle-class businessman’s millennium’.21 For Lewis the chief advantage of democratic government is that change and improvement is possible whereas fascism regards such ideals as freedom, justice and equality as unrealizable and even undesirable. The changes in the social structure that are envisaged ‘could be done within the good old framework of democracy, without stretching its principles too far. For democracy can be anything that is free. Let us lay that down for our golden rule of democracy. Anything that has “free” as its watchword can be classed as democracy’.22

The second brief section entitled How Fascism Began traces fascist roots in Marinetti’s Futurist Movement with its cult of action and power. If Marinetti was the ‘father of fascism’ he too had his origins in Sorel, Machiavelli and above all Nietzsche, to whom Mussolini frequently expressed his indebtedness. And if ‘the true family-tree for fascism in the realm of ideas is Nietzsche’, it originates through Nietzsche, back to Charles Darwin. Darwin was ‘just the generalizing research-student, Nietzsche was the philosopher of Darwinism’, but ‘if you wanted to put your hand on the instigator of fascism … Charles Darwin is your man’.23

In the final section of Anglosaxony, called Sea-Power and Universalism, Lewis credits the sea with having given birth to Anglo-Saxon democracy. While the myopically nationalist fascist is mystically obsessed with the land and has as watchword ‘blood and soil’, the internationalist Anglo-Saxon is the representative of the ocean. ‘Against Hitler, the Peasant, let us put forward a Seaman to stand for us – a symbol of animal restlessness against the Nazi symbol of animal fixity’.24 Lewis understands the war as a desire by the Axis Powers for expansion at the expense of the maritime nations who are considered to have selfishly locked up the resources of the world. To achieve this ‘the very notion of sea-supremacy must be assailed, and its concrete existence abolished’.25 German propaganda stigmatizes Anglo-Saxon sea-power as having the same ‘universalist’ – cosmopolitan or international – tendency as the Catholic Church and the Jews. For Hitler to challenge all three of these international forces Lewis regards as ‘strangely inept’, as the folly of a fanatic, as ‘a record of sublime naivete’ and as ‘the suicide of the German People’.26 But the attack on the three ‘universalist’ bodies may in the end prove fortunate since only the universal, international forces, with Anglo-Saxon democratic sea-mindedness a formative influence, will be likely to bring salvation from ‘these murderous explosions we call wars, which will shatter all human society unless we can devise some means of ending them’.27

The World State envisaged by Lewis after the war will have to be ‘an improved democracy, purged of any taint of racism or class-nobility’.28 Anglo-Saxon democracy, since it is essentially libertarian rather than authoritarian, might even be able to recommend to other nations an ‘antisectic, sweet-smelling, blue-eyed version of communism’.29 But however much it may be adapted, the democracy offered to the world must retain its essential character. ‘All the Anglo-Saxon should do just now – and this is a practical book for just now – is to put all he has got into this old word “democrat” and let other peoples take it or leave it. No one will ever offer them anything half as good’.30 For those who regard Lewis as ‘crypto-fascist’ the views expressed in Anglosaxony may come as a surprise. As D. G. Bridson writes in his study of Lewis’s political ideas,
Lewis had been badly misjudged by many people (myself among them) who had simply not taken the trouble to read what he had written, or tried to understand the reasons which lay behind it when they did. The general reader, indeed, may often be confused by the contradictions in Lewis's political statements. ('Contradict yourself, in order to live. You must remain broken up' would be Lewis's response.) The fact that Anglosaxony, a corrective to the balance of his political writing, has been very hard to obtain has not helped Lewis's reputation. Its availability now in the British Library may go some way to redress the balance.

3 Quoted in Meyers, op. cit., p. 260.
5 Ibid., p. 176.
9 Ibid., p. 289.
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid., p. 291: Lewis to Pierce, 17 July 1941.
12 Ibid., p. 294: Lewis to Pierce, 16 July 1941.
17 Wyndham Lewis, America, I Presume (New York, 1940), pp. 59, 293.
18 Ibid., pp. 211–12.
19 Wyndham Lewis, Anglosaxony (Toronto, 1941), p. 29.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid., p. 31.
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid., p. 48.
24 Ibid., p. 50.
25 Ibid., p. 60.
26 Ibid., pp. 62, 64.
27 Ibid., p. 65.
29 Anglosaxony, p. 75.
30 Ibid.
31 The Filibuster, p. xii.
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