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Bruce McLeod

Excerpt

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CHAPTER I

Introduction: productions of empire

Nothing could be more political than just the way objects are spatially distributed. Eagleton in Ross *Emergence of Social Space* xiii

I prefer to call this generative doubt the opening of non-isomorphic subjects, agents, and territories of stories unimaginable from the vantage point of the cyclopan, self-satiated eye of the master subject. The Western eye has fundamentally been a wandering eye, a travelling lens. These peregrinations have often been violent and insistent on mirrors for a conquering self – but not always.

Haraway *Simians* 192.

This book is about the production of space. More particularly, it explores the production of an empire, the creation of “Englands out of England” (Purchas *Hakluytus*, i.xxxviii). The expansive multiplication of certain (extremely unstable) spatial and ideological formulations was as much a question of imagination and myth as hard-nosed calculation and economic realities. My intention is to expose the innards, the facts and fictions, of a society and culture that by 1745 had coalesced into an empire that stood for liberty and commerce. In this project I hope to reinforce Edward Said’s contention that the “major . . . determining, political horizon of modern Western culture [is] imperialism” (*Culture* 60). I have, perhaps, taken the risky step of applying Said’s thesis to the very beginnings of what became, though not inevitably, the British empire. The 1580s is a time when imperialism clearly had more to do with far-fetched dreams than with far-flung territories. In light of this, I will follow the useful distinction made by an historian of Empire, between “Imperial Britain” and the “British Empire.” The former “indicates the informing spirit” or “consciousness” that aids and abets, sometimes precedes and often falsifies the territorial materiality of the latter (Cramb *Origins and Destiny* 5). Nonetheless, in the last decades of

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the sixteenth century the fairy tale of an English imperium began not only to gather pace but seriously take up space.

1580 was a ground-breaking year for “Imperial Britain.” As Lesley Cormack has shown in *Charting an Empire*, it was a year that saw the creation of new geographies based on imperial designs. Edmund Spenser’s short trip across the sea to Ireland coincided with Drake’s triumphant return from circumnavigating the globe. Drake’s achievement, and booty, ignited a frenzy of financial and literary speculation (far more of the latter than the former) and attempts at colonizing the New World. The new confidence, though short-lived as far as the Americas were concerned, rejuvenated England’s pursuits in the Old World. A precursor of the East India Company, the hugely successful Turkey/Levant Company was founded in 1581, while Pet and Jackman set off to find the North East Passage to China. The world appeared to be within England’s grasp, even if its nearest colony, as Spenser discovered, remained a world away. Spatial relations were rapidly being reconfigured through the dreams and nightmares of a renewed global and imperial sensibility – a sensibility given keener definition in the face of the annexation of Portugal by Philip II of Spain. New ways of organizing space on the ground as it were, whether the rise of the slave plantation in Brazil or of an environmentalism in England centred on country estates and progressive agricultural techniques, also mark 1580.¹ The aftermath of Drake’s return brought these developments into focus under the lens of England’s desire to replicate the success of the Spanish and Portuguese. The next century and a half saw this desire gain systematic form, territorial domination, and cultural legitimacy. The narration of this history is the subject of the following pages.

This book then explores the relationship between “Imperial Britain” and the evolution of the “British Empire” – the former often being at odds with the reality of the latter. Its design is to lay bare the sinews connecting the cultural imaginary to that multifaceted and uneven spatial production, empire-building. One early example of these sinews is the relationship of Thomas More’s *Utopia* to the New World. If More was inspired by Spain’s exploits in the New World, in 1531 Vasco de Quiroga began to build two cities for Indians in Mexico based on *Utopia* (Benevolo *European City* 119). Spain’s experiments in the Americas later spurred England into imperial activity with the second invasion of Ireland and forays to North America. It is this type of transaction and its repercussions within the Atlantic world of European imperialism that this book seeks to examine. But as in the case of *Utopia* there is often a

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crucial twist to this Eurocentric flow of information. If More's utopia springs from the knowledge produced by Spanish conquering in the Americas – Vespucci's name appears in the book – then it is more than likely that Amaurotum's urban layout (essentially a square) derives from, as Hanno-Walter Kruft points out, “the influence of the pre-Columbian town plans of Central America” (*Architectural Theory* 229). Was Vasco de Quiroga simply returning to Mexico a Europeanized version of a Central American spatial form, one seen in Europe as original to an Englishman's inspirational vision?²² Thus, the relationship between literature and colonialism is not only part of Europe's Atlantic world. It is also infused by a transcultural exchange with the colonized, although the latter's influence is usually relegated to a marginal, dependant role, if not erased altogether. My goal, therefore, is similar to that advocated by Gauri Viswanathan when she remarks, “with sustained cross-referencing between the histories of England and its colonies the relations between Western culture and imperialism will be progressively illuminated” (*Masks of Conquest* 169).

More's and Vasco de Quiroga's utopian schemes were part of a growing belief in the ability to manipulate nature and thereby improve the design of the human environment and its productive capacity. New ways of evaluating the environment were, as David Harvey points out, based on a “Cartesian vision of fixed property rights [and] of boundaries in abstract space” (*Justice* 265). Colonialism was the cutting edge of this ideology. Keith Thomas has shown that by the late sixteenth century and with the rise of Natural History nature is no longer seen as something solely to be dominated (*Man and the Natural World* 51). Economic exigencies, the acquisition of social status, and agricultural advances meant that nature was seen more in terms of the market than mayhem or the mysterious. Political changes also led to the production of a new nature. The abolition of feudal tenures and wardships, for instance, and the resultant greater security of landowners at the expense of copyholders, made “possible long-term, planned estate management” (Hill *Intellectual* 288–9). These interdependent forces, fuelled by England's political maneuvers and sense of providentialism, led landowners and merchants to harness and profit from resources in competition with other European powers. Under new structures of investment, speculation, and exploitation nature became a valuable commodity: a piece of property to be secured, a space of control, and the proper distribution of assets. Increasingly segregated and specialized, by the end of the sixteenth century the selling of space, both domestic and

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exotic, began to unify the British Isles and propel England overseas. As the exploitation became systematic the idealization of the land increased.

Such changes in England lent themselves to the ideology of a natural, hereditary, and meritocratic order, usually sanctioned by God and overseen by a benevolent ruler/landowner. We can trace the benefactors, at odds with the crown but acting as a local monarch, from Jonson's "To Penshurst" to Fielding's Squire Allworthy and Richardson's Sir Charles Grandison. The legitimacy of this superintendent rule was embedded in the space it presided over, most often a landscape centred on an ancient residence, and what Pope describes as "Nature Methodiz'd" ("An Essay on Criticism" *Poetry and Prose* 40). A political and aesthetic methodizing of nature went hand in glove with its economic re-formation by landowners. As Fernand Braudel points out "Cultures . . . are ways of ordering space just as economies are" (*Perspective* 65). Spatial structures were to reflect the subordination of nature to the cultured. Literature became replete with ideal versions of space. Lauro Martines's writing on the fifteenth-century building boom of *palazzi* in Florence is pertinent here. He argues that the elites' awareness of being able to extend and renew their power through spatial forms resulted in an interest in ideal cities and landscapes. Martines sees this as a "politically conservative conception, a response to the rising demand by princes and urban elites for grandeur and show, order and ample space, finesse and finished surfaces" (in Twombly *Power and Style* 17). Finished surfaces were only the most obvious display of the determination of elites to control the theater of social relations. Imbedded in these spatial morphologies is the crucial question of who are the subjects of history and geography, and who are the objects.

Culture, however, has the ability to transform subjects, to elevate or debase them. In other words "Imperial Britain," whether seen through the lens of literature or architecture, transfigures the brutal realities of the "British Empire." As Viswanathan argues, "the split between the material and the cultural practices of colonialism is nowhere sharper than in the progressive refinement of the rapacious, exploitive, and ruthless actor of history into the reflective subject of literature" (*Masks of Conquest* 20–1). The self-conscious, expansionist subject who must wrestle with the nefarious plots that threaten to steal away a civilized, Protestant, and English identity populates culture's empire. Further, "science," art, and literary culture were awash with an imperial mentality. The partnership of the mathematician Thomas Harriot and the

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Figure 1 Frontispiece, Thomas Harriot *A Briefe and True Report* London, 1590.

artist John White in the settlement of Roanoke amply displays such a culture. Fittingly, the frontispiece to Harriot's *A Briefe and True Report of . . . Virginia* (1590 edition) exemplifies the way in which Europeans and the culture of the elite framed those it sought to dominate. The classical triumphal arch is decorated with Indians who are clearly players, if

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marginal, in the narrative plot situated at the centre. As ornaments the Indians enrich an English set and design; they may loom large as characters within Harriot's text, but they are subordinates within the world-historical theatre of the English and their vision. The structure neatly embodies the relations of empire mediated through culture, in this case an illustration which invokes the masque, theatre, and classical architecture. Whether in Harriot's scenario or in the masque – both of which portray the bringing of order to confusion – the actors are part of the taming of nature, the transformation of perspective whereby the imperial English self is left in control of space.

As if commenting on the frontispiece, Bruno Zevi states that “architecture is environment, the stage on which our lives unfold” (*Architecture as Space* 32). Colonialism more urgently foregrounded the link between control over the environment and the actors. The theatrical metaphor used by authors like Pope to describe spatial relations and used by spatial designers like Inigo Jones to buttress the power of royalty and patrons points to the constructed and tenuous, even illusory, nature of elite rule. Nevertheless, space was the surest way to ensure control over opposition real or imagined. By studying spatial design – especially in the case of the English, who concentrated on legitimizing imperialism via the occupation of space rather than the subordination of other peoples – we can learn a good deal about the ideologies and conflicts within colonial and metropolitan society. As theorists of architecture from Vitruvius onward have recognized, social order rested on spatial design and vice versa.

The process of culturally framing or coordinating resistant populations for specific economic purposes was however undermined by colonialism itself. As it produces itself, colonial society threatens to unravel because its “natural order” is constantly questioned by the proximity of and interchange with other societies. Its inevitable cross-cultural and territorially uncertain character means that the colonizers' social order is in constant jeopardy. The constructedness of colonial society, hence its flaws and failings, are exposed as it attempts to conceal them in the interests of presenting a natural, coherent, and controlled society fit for rulership. Edmund Spenser recognized as much through his years in Ireland: “how quickly doth that country alter men's natures” (*View* 151). Hence, central to the colonial enterprise is the project of working up a dominant hegemonic order which invalidates, dismisses, and renders unimaginable the possibility of counter-hegemonic sites, systems, and societies. As Stephen Saunders Webb has demonstrated, from the

beginning England's colonial ventures were as much military as they were mercantile in nature. The military, no matter where they were stationed, carried out disciplinary measures to ensure loyalty to the monarch and subservience to colonial rule (*Governors* xvi–xvii). In order to keep the vulnerable subject in a constant state of check the theaters of war and culture are inextricably bound.

If counter-hegemonic rumblings upset Spenser and the New English in Ireland, the military also had to put its foot down on the other side of the Atlantic. In 1610 “*Laves Divine, Morall and Martiall*” had to be instituted in the early Jamestown colony in order to dissuade insubordination by colonists (Morgan *American Slavery* 74). It was not only Indians who needed to be set within the proper standards of behaviour. The laws were mainly directed at the blurring of socio-spatial categories by colonists who defected to the Powhatan confederacy. The “natural” rule of the authorities is radically undermined by the “generative doubt” or the “unimaginable,” as Haraway puts it in the epigraph above, created by the interaction of different cultural systems. Under such propitious circumstances colonists chose to cross from their own into the space of the Other. Whether in the colonies or in the British Isles, cultural spaces were contested, interactive, and were viewed strategically by all competing groups. Essentially the contest is over resources. As Carole Fabricant puts it, unsettling prospects concerning socio-spatial mobility and stability “inevitably revolv[e] around the question of who has access to land and on what terms” (in Nussbaum and Brown *New Eighteenth Century* 255). Thus Vasco de Quiroga’s plans, like those of Thomas More, colonial leaders, and landowners, sought to “improve” land so as to rid it of conflict and disorder; those who did not or refused to be bit players in the drama of Europe’s manifest destiny were casualties of history. Because so many resisted becoming casualties, the ideal or paradisaical and the fortified are inseparable. Colonial utopias, which are so often invoked in one form or another in the texts studied in the following chapters, plot the great master-narrative of (benevolent) imperialism battling numerous “great master-mischief[s].” In Edmund Burke’s day these were identified as Jacobinism coupled with that timeless imperial illness “Indianism” (*Works* vi, 58).³

The authors and texts that I examine exemplify the interaction between literary culture and the developing world of Britain’s first empire. Few of the major authors during this period did not invest either financially,

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politically or bodily in colonial ventures, and this must surely tell us something about who became established writers, how they saw themselves as writers, and what constituted literary subject matter and culture generally. Edmund Spenser, John Milton, Aphra Behn, Mary Rowlandson, Daniel Defoe, and Jonathan Swift (as well as a slew of other “colonial surveyors”) imagine, interrogate, and narrate the adventure and geography of empire. Yet more than being inextricably part and parcel of an imperial culture these particular writers have a personal stake in colonialism: as colonists (Spenser, Behn, Rowlandson, and Swift) and as enthusiasts or ideologues (Milton and Defoe). Their investment is especially significant given the canonical status of many of the texts they penned, and serves to underscore the central question of my book: how does literature function in relation to imperialism?

I argue that a great deal of national culture during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was imbued with a geographical imagination fed by the experiences and experiments of colonialism. In *The Staple of News*, for instance, Ben Jonson reproduces Captain John Smith’s description of Pocahontas verbatim. As Anthony Pagden has pointed out, culture was shot through with the “language of empire” (the core of which changed little over the centuries), the sense of a new geography, and the lure of the Americas (*Lords* 6). This imaginary, which effectively normalizes empire, brought the sight and sound, if not the touch and taste, of imperial adventure into everyday circulation. Hence when Charlotte Smith, in the 1780s, wants to celebrate “Harriet” and her “friendship’s cheering light,” she does so via the recounting of a captivity narrative set in North America, where, like Mary Rowlandson, the English captive, pursued by “torturing, savage foes” and “reptile-monsters” of the “waste,” finally “hails the beam benign that guides his way” to a fort and civility (Smith *Poems* 50). Empire was the stuff of common sense as well as daydreams and infinite possibilities, casually conjured up by members of the colonizing nation: “he dreamt of becoming a trapper in America, of entering the service of a pasha in the East, of signing on as a sailor” (Flaubert *Sentimental Education* 101).

The empire did not capture the collective imagination of British literary culture. The cultural imagination was never outside the geopolitical development of empire. Indeed, as will become clear, some of the great works of English literature are inconceivable without imperialism. Referring to imperial “structures of location and geographical reference” within which culture is always-already situated, Said argues that “these structures do not arise from some pre-existing . . . design that the

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writers then manipulate, but are bound up with the development of Britain's cultural identity, as that identity imagines itself in a geographically conceived world" (*Culture* 52). To argue for the existence of an imperial culture is not to reduce imagination to a reflex of imperialism. On the contrary, imagination is active, as much agent as antagonist. The point is that the development of British culture is inseparable from that historical project and seemingly unending source of wealth, both in goods and knowledge, known as planting abroad. In other words, English (and after 1707 British) culture only came to knowledge of itself through the accumulation and "cultivation" (economically and culturally) of territory inhabited by populations deemed backward, inferior, or worse.

Imperialism is the global extension of and solution to the driving and often dissonant forces of early modern capitalist society forever in search of markets and profit margins. Spurred on by an unstable and ever-evolving ensemble of forces (most of which were unique to England in the seventeenth century) – new agricultural practices, urban expansion, population growth, property rights, a centralized state, and mercantilism – imperialism reproduces and reinvents spaces for capitalism, its managers, soldiers, and labor. More than this however, imperialism produces the naturalization of thinking about space in a certain way.

Culture uses the volatile arena of colonial space to air pressing social issues, and at the same time colonialism *structures* culture with its imaginative and material results. Space undergoing the uneven, fraught, and never complete process of colonization offers up to inspection the most naked forms and forces of the metropolitan society's development, just as it seems to provide amelioration for social problems. It provides a discourse for evaluating and imagining, as well as re-forming society, its progress, success, and ills. A constellation of forces from providentialism to empiricism fuse in the hothouse of colonial space, producing material perfect for the analysis of questions of authority, property, and individual rights. This occurs as English society moves from a late feudal society of deference and obligation to the mercantile and agrarian capitalist order of individual autonomy and the values of the marketplace. Imperial expansion was the very hallmark of progress and was eagerly affirmed by the cultural elite. Rev. Samuel Purchas couched his 1625 collection of colonial and trading narratives in the following terms: "here Purchas and his Pilgrimes minister individuall and sensible materials (as it were with Stones, Bricks and Mortar) to those universall Speculators for their Theoricall structures" (*Haklytus* I.xl). My project

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interrogates this kind of analogy between discourse and building materials, between cultural and concrete spatial productions.

Culture, as Said has argued in *Culture and Imperialism*, has often been the vanguard for empire, preparing the ground, providing the conceptual apparatus and imaginative repertoire, and predisposing the metropolitan pioneers for the tasks and territory that they encounter (9). Although literary culture voiced criticism of imperial designs, empire was often viewed in a progressive light, its magnetism throwing established orthodoxies and institutions into disarray. Spurred on by the potential to form “new” societies from scratch, the literary imagination explored the notion of sovereignty within the auspices of nascent capitalism, working through the different spatial scales ranging from the autonomous individual and the “primitive,” to the nation and its colonies. The question of how to parcel out rights and how to control them, who fits the bill and who is to foot the bill is a central theme within the literature I analyze.

As post-colonial studies has shown, the often progressive nature of imperial culture, as it promoted utopian plans (from More to Coleridge), economic and social mobility, individualism, the communication of ideas due to inter-national trade (Lefebvre *Production* 217), and the rationalism of the Enlightenment, presented the colonized peoples with the short, sharpened end of the stick. Radicals at home were often imperialists abroad. The imperial culture which presented new realities and subjectivities, and critiqued the old, was underwritten by several assumptions. England’s status as the chosen nation destined to export liberty and commerce was seldom questioned. Nor was the central legitimation for English colonialism seriously challenged. The Roman law or “agriculturist” argument known as *res nullius*, which rendered unimproved and unowned land (by English standards) empty and thus available for colonization (Pagden *Lords* 76–9) was rarely critiqued. That the Spanish bloodily imposed “colonies” while the English acquired “plantations” (though they were capable of slipping into Spanish behavior) became a sort of catechism. Empire was a fact of everyday life or, to use Raymond Williams’s evocative phrase, a “structure of feeling.” It was a way of life, its definition and future open to debate but not its existence. Not only were the English self-conscious heirs to the classical empires, but Christian providentialism, whether as guiding beacon or as the power behind Britannia’s throne, remained the “ideological taproot” of England’s national and imperial character (Marshall *Eighteenth Century* 233).⁴ Like God, empire was a force akin to the “direction of nature nurturing,” to appropriate a phrase from Defoe (*Best of Defoe’s Review* 126).