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978-0-521-54101-5 - The Cambridge Introduction to Postcolonial Literatures in English

C. L. Innes

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*The Cambridge Introduction to
Postcolonial Literatures in English*

The past century has witnessed an extraordinary flowering of fiction, poetry and drama from countries previously colonised by Britain, an output which has changed the map of English literature. This introduction, from a leading figure in the field, explores a wide range of Anglophone postcolonial writing from Africa, Australia, the Caribbean, India, Ireland and Britain. Lyn Innes compares the ways in which authors shape communal identities and interrogate the values and representations of peoples in newly independent nations. Placing its emphasis on literary rather than theoretical texts, this book offers detailed discussion of many internationally renowned authors, including Chinua Achebe, James Joyce, Les Murray, Salman Rushdie and Derek Walcott. It also includes historical surveys of the main countries discussed, a glossary, and biographical notes on major authors. Lyn Innes provides a rich and subtle guide to an array of authors and texts from a wide range of sites.

C. L. Innes is Emeritus Professor of Postcolonial Literatures at the University of Kent. She is the author of, among other books, *A History of Black and Asian Writing in Britain* (Cambridge, 2002).

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Preface

This book sets out to consider some of the writing that has emerged during the past century from the numerous and complex range of postcolonial societies which were formerly part of the British Empire. It seeks not only to discuss the authors and texts, but also to raise questions about the ways in which they have been thought about under the aegis of postcolonial studies, and to ask what varying meanings postcolonial literature may have in different contexts.

In the first decades of the twentieth century, European states governed more than 80 per cent of the world's territories and people. Of these the British Empire was the most extensive and powerful, claiming as British subjects a population of between 470 and 570 million people, approximately 25 per cent of the world's population, and laying claim to more than ninety territories in Africa, Asia, Europe, North America, the Caribbean, Australasia and the Pacific. Almost all those territories have now evolved and/or combined into independent states, fifty-three of which constitute the 'British' Commonwealth, a voluntary organization which several former colonies such as Burma, Egypt, Ireland, and Iraq declined to join when they gained independence.¹ To a greater or lesser degree, all these territories shared a history of cultural colonialism, including the imposition of the English language, and British educational, political and religious institutions, as well as economic relationships and systems.

Within the context of postcolonial writing, critics have often quoted Caliban's retort to Prospero in *The Tempest*: 'You gave me language, and my profit on't / Is I know how to curse.'² Perhaps less frequently quoted, but even more significant, are the lines which display Caliban's eloquence (in the English language) when it comes to describing the island Prospero has taken from him, with a combination of force, magic and the seductions of new learning:

Be not afeard; the isle is full of noises,
Sounds and sweet airs, that delight and hurt not.
Sometimes a thousand twanging instruments
Will hum about mine ears; and sometimes voices³

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As George Lamming commented, ‘Prospero had given Caliban Language; and with it an unstated history of consequences, and unknown history of future intentions.’⁴

Thus one major and unintended consequence of British colonialism has been an enormous flowering of literature in English by postcolonial authors, presenting the story of colonialism and its consequences from their perspective, and reclaiming their land and experience through fiction, drama and poetry, a representation and reclamation requiring a reinvention of the English language and English literary traditions.

This book cannot attempt to encompass the many literary texts and cultures that are an important feature of the anglophone postcolonial world. Even to try to acknowledge half of those ninety territories or former colonies would result in superficial lists of authors and a blurring of the qualities and issues specific to different colonial and postcolonial histories and cultural contexts. Hence, although there will be occasional reference to writers from other countries such as Canada, the Republic of South Africa, Sri Lanka and Zimbabwe, this book will concentrate on works from just a few former colonies, chosen as examples of particular kinds of colonial and postcolonial structures and traditions. These include Ireland, as England’s oldest colony and the testing ground for many of her later colonial policies. More importantly for this study, Ireland’s literary revival is acknowledged by many postcolonial writers in other countries as a model for their own construction of a national literature. In addition to Ireland, I have chosen India and West Africa (specifically Ghana and Nigeria) as examples of former colonies administered by indirect rule but with very different indigenous cultures. Kenya and Tanzania, with their varied indigenous populations together with a history of white settlement and occupation of farming land, as well as immigrants from the Indian subcontinent and the Middle East, provide examples of settler colonies in Africa with a multicultural history and population. Australia represents a predominantly white settler colony and postcolony whose identity involves not only two centuries of development and attachment to a natural world perceived as almost the reverse of Britain’s, but also its origins as a convict settlement, and its history of brutal dispossession of the continent’s Aboriginal peoples. The Caribbean islands of Jamaica, St Lucia and Trinidad provide histories of enforced immigration, enslavement and acculturation, where original languages and traditions were either submerged and/or masked and transformed. Finally, the diasporic communities in contemporary Britain from former colonies provide another point of departure for contrast and comparison with Caribbean and other multicultural or intercultural societies. An Appendix provides brief histories of the selected areas to help orient readers.

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These histories have been compiled with considerable assistance from Dr Kaori Nagai, whose careful research and keen intelligence have also contributed to the biographical entries for the main authors discussed, and the glossary of terms. I also wish to acknowledge the contributions of many undergraduate and postgraduate students at Tuskegee Institute, Cornell University, the University of Massachusetts, and the University of Kent, whose varied enthusiasms and questions have informed my teaching and writing over the years. This book has benefited from insights and new material brought to my attention by former postgraduate students and I wish particularly to acknowledge Maggie Bowers, Sarah Chetin, Paul Delaney, Eugene McNulty, Kaori Nagai, Elodie Rousselot, Florian Stadler, Amy Smith, Mark Stein, Monica Turci, and Anastasia Vassalopoulos. Past and present colleagues at the University of Kent and elsewhere to whom I owe a particular debt include Samuel Allen, Ashok Bery, Elleke Boehmer, Denise deCaires Narain, Rod Edmond, Abdulrazak Gurnah, Louis James, Declan Kiberd, Susheila Nasta, Stephanie Newell, Caroline Rooney, Joe Skerrett, Angela Smith, Dennis Walder and my husband, Martin Scofield. Tobias Döring's thoughtful comments on the draft manuscript have been exceptionally helpful, as have been his own publications.

Sections of this book have appeared previously in different versions as journal essays or chapters in books. Since they first appeared, they have been considerably revised, updated and elaborated within different contexts. I acknowledge their publication in earlier form and express my thanks to the editors and publishers of the following:

Howard Booth and Nigel Rigby, eds., *Modernism and Empire* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000).

Clara A. B. Joseph and Janet Wilson, eds., *Global Fissures: Postcolonial Fusions* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2006).

Tobias Döring, ed., *A History of Postcolonial Fiction in Twelve and a Half Books* (Trier: WVT, Wiss. Verl. Trier, 2006).