

## Strolling Players of Empire

Why did Britons get up a play wherever they went? Kathleen Wilson reveals how the performance of English theater and a theatricalized way of viewing the world shaped the geopolitics and culture of empire in the long eighteenth century. Ranging across the Atlantic, Indian and Pacific Oceans to encompass Kingston, Calcutta, Fort Marlborough, St. Helena and Port Jackson as well as London and provincial towns, she shows how Britons on the move transformed peripheries into historical stages where alternative collectivities were enacted, imagined and lived. Men and women of various ethnicities, classes and legal statuses produced and performed English theater in the world, helping to consolidate a national and imperial culture. The theater of empire also enabled non-British people to adapt or interpret English cultural traditions through their own performances, as Englishness also became a production of non-English peoples across the globe.

Kathleen Wilson is Distinguished Professor of History at Stony Brook University. Her prizewinning scholarship focuses on questions of identity, empire and culture in the long eighteenth century. Previous books include *The Sense of the People: Politics, Culture and Imperialism in England, 1715–1785* (1995), *The Island Race: Englishness, Empire and Gender in the Eighteenth Century* (2003) and *A New Imperial History: Culture, Identity and Modernity in Britain and the Empire, 1660–1840* (2004). A former Guggenheim and NEH Fellow and past president of the American Society of Eighteenth-Century Studies, Wilson lives with her human and nonhuman relations in Manhattan and Long Island.

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# Strolling Players of Empire

*Theater and Performances of Power in the British  
Imperial Provinces, 1656–1833*

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Kathleen Wilson

*State University of New York, Stony Brook*



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To Nick and Hannah, as always

To robbery, slaughter, and plunder they give the lying name of empire;  
they make a solitude and call it peace.

Chief Calgacus, in Tacitus, *The Agricola* (AD 98)

Of all the means for making the impression of ideal presence, theatrical  
presence is the most powerful. That words independent of action have  
the same power to a lesser degree, everyone of sensibility must have felt.

Henry Home, Lord Kames, *The Elements of Criticism* (1762)

[Slavery is] an injustice that will not cancel out . . . [it] is a Collective  
Ghost of more than household Scale, – the Wrongs Committed Daily  
against the Slaves, petty and grave ones alike, going unrecorded,  
charm'd invisible to history, invisible yet possessing Mass, and  
Velocity, able not only to Rattle Chains but to break them as well.

Thomas Pynchon, *Mason & Dixon* (1997)

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# Abbreviations

Add MSS	Additional Manuscripts, British Library
AEC	David Collins, <i>Account of the English Colony</i> (London, 1798)
AHR	<i>American Historical Review</i>
BL	British Library
CCBT	<i>Cambridge Companion to British Theatre 1730–1830</i> , edited by Jane Moody and Daniel O’Quinn (Cambridge, 2009)
CSPC	<i>Calendar of State Papers Colonial, America and West Indies</i> (London, 1860–1926)
ECS	<i>Eighteenth-Century Studies</i>
EIC	East India Company
EUR MS	European Manuscripts Private Papers, India Office, British Library
EVSP	Bernard Smith, <i>European Vision and the South Pacific</i> (New Haven, CT, 1985)
HJ	<i>Historical Journal</i>
HL	Henry H. Huntington Library and Art Gallery, San Marino, California
HRA	<i>Historical Records of Australia</i> , edited by Frederick Watson, 16 vols. (Sydney, 1997 [1914–25])
HRNSW	<i>Historical Records of New South Wales</i> , edited by F. M. Bladen, Alexander Britton and James Cook, 9 vols. (Sydney, 1892–1901)
IOR	India Office, British Library
JA	Jamaica Archives, Spanish Town
JAJ	<i>Journals of the Assembly of Jamaica</i>
JBS	<i>Journal of British Studies</i>
LPL	Lambeth Palace Library
ML	Mitchell Library, Sydney
NA	National Archives, Kew (London)
NLJ	National Library of Jamaica

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<i>OHGT</i>	<i>The Oxford Handbook of the Georgian Theatre 1737–1832</i> , edited by Julia Swindells and David Francis Taylor (Oxford, 2014)
<i>SFFY</i>	Watkin Tench, <i>Sydney’s First Four Years: Being a Reprint of “A Narrative of the Expedition to Botany Bay,”</i> and “ <i>A Complete Account of the Settlement at Port Jackson,</i> ” edited by L. F. Fitzhardinge (Sydney, 1961)
SHA	St. Helena Archives, Jamestown, the Castle, St. Helena
SLNSW	State Library of New South Wales
WMQ	<i>William and Mary Quarterly</i>
YCBA	Yale Center for British Art