

The Victorian Colonial Romance with the Antipodes

By Helen Lucy Blythe

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Reviewed by Philip Steer

Does New Zealand matter to the rest of the world? For various reasons the question has always seemed important here, a kind of hollow echo bouncing around national politics, economics and culture, and reflecting back most strongly from concrete measures of overseas recognition: a seat on the United Nations Security Council; an Oscar or a Booker Prize; a World Cup; a global milk auction. For scholars working on New Zealand studies, a version of this question is prompted by the rise of institutional incentives such as the Marsden Fund and the PBRF, which frame “research excellence” in large part in terms of global visibility. It’s a challenge, perhaps, of speaking to two audiences at the same time: a local readership familiar with a narrow but deep national archive, and an international readership who must be persuaded of its relevance to their more “mainstream” concerns. Yet the question can also be asked another way: Does the study of New Zealand have to be framed solely in national terms? Shaped for so long by the ethos and aesthetics of mid-twentieth century cultural nationalism, humanistic inquiry in New Zealand still tends to use the nation as its unquestioned unit of measurement.

Recently, historians have been offering some striking methodological challenges to the national parameters of New Zealand studies, notably Tony Ballantyne’s turn to the local and James Belich’s embrace of the world system.¹ If literary scholars have been lagging behind, Helen Lucy Blythe’s *The Victorian Colonial Romance with the Antipodes* opens up some intriguing possibilities by locating New Zealand’s nineteenth-century literature within the broader field of Victorian studies. Her success in placing a project such as this—one that straddles interdisciplinary boundaries of nation and period, and dwells in an archive that does not fully belong to either—with a respectable international publisher is a feat that certainly deserves acknowledgment. For, let us be honest, there are slim pickings on offer in nineteenth-century New Zealand for the internationally-minded literary critic: after dealing with Butler, a few bits of Trollope, and a whole lot of Domett, who is left? And even about them, what might be said that is of sufficient interest to tempt a Victorianist away from their Dickens and Eliot?

At the heart of Blythe’s response to these challenges of archive and audience are two terms—the romance and the antipodes—each of which is understood in a two-fold manner. The romance is a genre, but it also invokes sentiments of fascination and longing; the antipodes as a place, “the airy barrier dividing the southern and northern hemispheres” (1), but it also a mindset of playfulness and escapism. *Victorian Colonial Romance* argues that the ideas driving the settlement of New Zealand in self-conscious imitation of Britain, coupled with the colony’s antipodal spatial relationship to the metropolis, combined to produce texts that are preoccupied with paradoxes of similarity and inversion, and consistently marked by formal innovations. “Characterized by inversion, fancy, impossibility, and symmetry, the Antipodes offered a distinctive narrative path for writers,” Blythe states at the outset, “providing a symbolic architecture for investigating the tensions between proximity and distance, particularly concerning the self and the other, while signifying equally a distant land both familiar and strange, the opposite and yet distorted or idealized mirror of home” (4). This global horizon stands in marked contrast to the nation-focused rehabilitation of New Zealand’s colonial literary history initiated by Jane Stafford and Mark Williams’ *Maoriland* (2006), which sought to bestow legitimacy on their forgotten texts by finding their authors engaged in the search for a “locally marked literature,” thus aligning them with the aesthetic and thematic preoccupations that the cultural nationalists claimed they had to invent in the 1930s and 40s.² Such local arguments would not sway Blythe’s audience of Victorianist scholars, of course, but it’s

plausible that their hearts might instead be melted by a tale of transnational exchange. Such an approach has further benefits: it allows Blythe to delve deeper into the century, prior to the emergence of any widespread proto-nationalist sentiment; it also has the potential to make a strength of the kind of formal features and concerns so often seen as evidence of failure to attain a local aesthetic.

To highlight these patterns of exchange, *Victorian Colonial Romance* focuses on five figures of widely varying degrees of literary prominence, each of whom spent some time in New Zealand without ever fully “settling” there. One of the real strengths of the book is its attention to archival material, correspondence in particular, which affirms the extent to which writing in New Zealand was inherently multinational in nature. Blythe begins with Tom Arnold, brother of Matthew, whose decision to emigrate in 1847 was a product of the colony’s early Victorian reputation as an escapist “realm of romance”: “he envisioned the Antipodes as an ideal Platonic site of the good, the true, the beautiful, a place where he could create a colonial aesthetic from manual labor, and dismantle the rigid distinctions dividing the classes” (31). Arnold’s life is at the centre of this chapter, rather than any literary text, and Blythe traces the disenchantment of his aestheticized ideals as a result of actually working alongside Māori and members of the working class. The second chapter, roughly contemporaneous with the first, concerns Mary Taylor: while her main claim to fame is her friendship with the Brontës, she also spent 15 years in Wellington working to establish financial independence, and while there she began a provincial novel that would ultimately be published decades later as *Miss Miles, or, A Tale of Yorkshire Life 60 Years Ago* (1890). Blythe sets out to “add Taylor’s life and works to the expanding literary dialogue on nineteenth-century emigration, settlement, and gender” (58), yet doing so requires connecting the financial independence and aesthetic frustration of her colonial career to this belated novel that lacks any apparent concern for the colony. As with the first chapter, a romanticized notion of settlement provides the motivation for emigration, before disillusionment leads to a failure of settlement and further imaginative flight: the novel is thus read as symptomatic of Taylor being “entirely disengaged from the colonial contact zone, retreating from the isolation of the social present into an aesthetic and psychic space of the beyond” (60). Despite the intriguing claim that Taylor’s novel is inflected by character qualities that marked her own colonial experience, including adaptability, compassion, and “intellectual mobility” (77), what begins to emerge in *Victorian Colonial Romance* is essentially another variation on the familiar story of the colony’s inhospitality to art.

The third chapter continues the account of settler alienation by turning to Alfred Domett, whose “fail[ure] to establish such affective ties” (90) found expression in the irresolvable dualisms of his epic poem, *Ranolf and Amohia: A South-Sea Day-Dream* (1872). Blythe finds the poem simultaneously affirmative of pastoral emigration rhetoric and haunted by scenes of colonial violence, as well as both embracing and recoiling from the prospect of racial mixing. Such tensions are held to be characteristic of the Antipodes and the romance:

Domett’s ambivalence toward limiting colonial exigencies reinvigorates the hierarchical structure of romance’s ascent and descent[,] mirrored spatially in the movement of the pastoral retreat and return, and converging in [the] literal and metaphorical reversals of the Antipodes. In Domett’s eyes, the colony is both England’s antithesis—its literal and figurative underworld—and its progeny—enjoined, but abandoned, even a sacrificial victim—like himself. (100)

Similar oscillations and oppositions are also at the centre of Blythe’s account of Samuel Butler, whose contrarianism she argues “took root . . . as he grappled with the effects of traversing the Equator to the Antipodes and discovered the cultural reversals, crossings, and contradictions occurring there” (126). *Erewhon* is positioned as a precursor to the proto-Modernist concerns

of *The Way of All Flesh* (1903), with its narrator's journey over the range enacting the displacement of a colonial desire for mastery of knowledge and nature by an openness to difference that resembles nothing so much as an eighteenth-century cosmopolitanism. Erewhon, "a new zone that privileges the beautiful human body, instincts, and unreason" (142), provides the basis for a pervasive critique of various binary oppositions animating Victorian society and imperial endeavour. Blythe's final sojourner in New Zealand, Anthony Trollope, only briefly visited the colony in the early 1870s, but she maintains that what he observed of Māori decline haunted him throughout the decade, and ultimately found expression in his odd fable of settlement, *The Fixed Period* (1882). In that novel, the colonists of Britannula, led by a charismatic demagogue, have instituted a policy of compulsory euthanasia at age 67: Blythe argues that through a shared "discourse of expendability," Māori are "spectral presences" in the text, displaced by the figures of colonists subject to euthanasia (160, 161). Further complicated by British machinations to re-annex the colony in the name of human rights, the novel's contradictory oppositions and irresolvable tensions constitute one final example of volatile, intangible Antipodean romance.

Despite the sincerity of these readings, *Victorian Colonial Romance* remains riven by its own irreconcilable paradoxes of methodology. One of these is Blythe's narrow geographic conception of the antipodes, which excises Australia despite Patrick Brantlinger having taught a generation of Victorianists about the "double, contradictory" nineteenth-century discourses surrounding a continent where the swans were black and the settlers were convicts, such that its "polar extremes seem almost to parody the general contradictions of imperialist ideology."³ The problem lies not with Blythe's decision to focus on New Zealand, but with her use of an anachronistic national framework to constrain the Victorians' geographic vision of the antipodes. The book's narrow scope is difficult to substantiate in light of New Zealand's nineteenth-century traffic with the Australian colonies—Thomas Arnold, subject of the first chapter, lived far longer in Tasmania than he did in New Zealand—while metropolitan commentators lumped them together as much as they treated them separately. A more troubling methodological paradox permeating the book originates in its struggle to reconcile literature and history. Blythe's most persistent critical influence is Northrop Frye's theory of the romance as a timeless expression of universal psychological archetypes: "romance concerns identity formation," she argues in this vein, "and certainly the travellers in *The Victorian Romance with the Antipodes* search for new selves in the New World, finding literary expression in tales of journeys of selfhood in which their characters explore and discover new identities through radical change, sometimes approaching death or metempsychosis" (20-21). That timeless conception of genre aligns with Blythe's similarly ahistorical understanding of the antipodes, traced enthusiastically back to the Greeks, which she upholds first and foremost as an imaginary space "of complete otherness, distant, unreachable, beyond the known, and therefore, both product and symbol of the imagination" (9). The marriage of these archetypal models of genre and geography shapes an account of settler culture that is almost entirely evacuated of historical specificity. The individuals and works discussed here all end up telling essentially the same bland story, of "ambivalence and contradiction concerning the ethics of empire formation, and the Enlightenment dichotomy of civilization and savagery" (26-7). While it's hard to argue with such broad and unobjectionable claims, it's equally hard to see how they advance our understanding of nineteenth-century New Zealand writing. There is little sense that colonial thinking might have changed over time—or that metropolitan thinking might have, for that matter—while the specific crises and transformations of the colonial century, and the imprint they might have left on local writing, are largely ignored in favour of a recurring pattern of individual enthusiasm and escapism. The ultimate paradox of *The Victorian Romance with the Antipodes*, then, is the extent of New Zealand's absence.

¹ Tony Ballantyne, "Thinking Local: Knowledge, Sociability and Community in Gore's Intellectual Life, 1875-1914," *New Zealand Journal of History* 44.2 (2010): 138-156; James Belich, *Replenishing the Earth: The Settler Revolution and the Rise of the Anglo-World, 1783-1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

² Jane Stafford and Mark Williams, *Maoriland: New Zealand Literature, 1872-1914* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2006), 14.

³ Patrick Brantlinger, *Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism, 1830-1914* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 132.