

*Romantic Literature and the Colonised World: Lessons from Indigenous Translations.*

By Nikki Hessell. Palgrave, New York, 2018.

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Reviewed by Olivia Murphy

This is the most interesting book I have read in some time. Part of the excellent Palgrave series *Studies in the Enlightenment, Romanticism and Cultures of Print*, Nikki Hessell's book might be thought of as participating in the relatively small, albeit significant, field of Romantic Indigeneity. Although rarely explicitly acknowledged as such, Romantic studies has for some time demonstrated an implicit preoccupation with British archipelagic Indigeneity, which has in certain cases placed quintessentially Romantic questions of localness, place and language in a wider global context of Indigeneity. As Hessell points out, however, studies of the importance of Indigeneity to Romanticism tend to flow in one direction (as seen in works by Tim Fulford and Fiona Stafford, among others): the Romantics' use of largely imagined Indigenous tropes. Explicit Romantic engagement with Indigeneity – from Felicia Hemans's Indians to Robert Southey's Tahitians – tends to reflect earlier ideas of the 'noble savage', and was itself, as postcolonial scholars have shown, frequently deployed as a tool of colonialism.

*Romantic Literature and the Colonised World* takes a very different approach. Its methodology is no less sophisticated and ground-breaking for being straightforward: Hessell identifies a number of moments of translation of canonical Romantic literary works into Indigenous languages, in order to uncover what these translations can tell us both about their contexts and about the original works themselves. This strategy inverts long-held assumptions about the processes of intellectual exchange between the centre and periphery of Empire. Fascinatingly, it also illuminates local literary cultures caught between resistance to and appropriation of Romantic texts that often served as tools of imperial power.

In the context of Aotearoa New Zealand, for instance, Hessell identifies a number of translations of poems by Felicia Hemans into Māori, translations made by Pākehā during a period of intensive publication of Māori-language texts that, Hessell notes, was prompted by desires 'to influence Māori behaviour' (28). Hemans's reputation as 'the preeminent poet of colonisation' (25), the author of superficially sentimental, moralising lyrics suitable for adaptation into song or hymn form, made her well suited to missionary purposes. Hessell's analysis of these translations reveals the attempt being made by Pākehā translators to investigate, interpret and mirror Māori spiritual beliefs and traditions in their translations. Departures from literal translation thus reveal unanticipated spiritual depths, both in the Māori and original English versions of the poems. For example, in her discussion of 'The Hour of Prayer', Hessell argues that Māori versions 'pick up on the vital importance of the metaphor of light and darkness ... not just because it is significant in Hemans's poem, but because it is deeply embedded in Māori spirituality and the Māori language' (32). Hessell identifies multiple Māori versions of 'The Hour of Prayer', and in assessing them chronologically demonstrates the ways in which translation – as a subset of literary publication more generally – was being deployed as political commentary in a turbulent period. An 1887 translation thus reflects, in its added emphasis on unity, responses to the political tumult that followed the 1860s land wars. It is thus, writes Hessell, 'the ultimate colonial rendition of the poem', seeking to appeal at once to Māori readers' spiritual traditions and to their reactions to 'the religious and political changes of the post-contact era' (37).

Hessell's analysis of these Pākehā-produced Māori-language translations certainly sheds fascinating new light on how Hemans's poetry functioned in a colonial context. It is in the next five chapters, however, in which the book's focus shifts to translations of Romantic texts by Indigenous writers, that the full potential of Hessell's approach is made clear. Translations by Māori authors of Robert Burns, Hawaiian authors' translations of Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe*, and translations into Malayalam of Wordsworth and Keats all contribute to a developing picture of the uses and potential of indigenous re-workings of Romantic texts.

Translations by Māori writers of Burns, like the Hawaiian writers' translations of Scott, were made possible by the development of flourishing nineteenth-century newspaper cultures in those languages. Hessell shows the ways in which indigenous writers could comment on or adapt British Romanticism to their own traditions. Chapter 3 considers the ways in which a translation of a Burns lament like 'Thou Lingerin Star' emphasises its formal connections to the Māori poetic form waiata tangi, and in particular 'Tērā te whetū' ('There is an Evening Star'), which Hessell presents in English translation for the reader's comparison (62). This comparison demonstrates the ways in which Māori translators revered Burns largely because of his poetry's ability to chime with existing Māori literary conventions. Burns's ideas and images, as well as his words, spoke to Māori poets and politicians alike, these translations instances of what Hessell shows is a 'meeting place between two formidable literary traditions that have influenced each other and drawn strengths from their similarities and differences' (79).

I have focused here on those aspects of the book most relevant to studies of the literature, Māori- and English-language, of Aotearoa New Zealand. The book is also essential reading for anyone interested in the reception of Romantic literature in Hawaii or what is now the Indian state of Kerala. There will be something here for any researcher working on one of the translated authors, and riches for those interested in the ways in which the reception of Anglophone Romantic texts interacted with the evolution of indigenous-language literature in the colonial period.

Most valuable, however, is a methodology that offers a respectful, intellectually rigorous point from which to undertake such urgent and provocative transcultural work. *Romantic Literature and the Colonised World* makes an excellent starting point for scholars of postcolonial literature by showing the 'empire writing back', in its own languages, during the long struggle to maintain Indigenous cultures in the face of imperial repression. Hessell's examples pre-date, in most cases, coordinated political bids for independence from Britain, suggesting – if not quite indigenous literature's engagement with Romantic poetry as the necessary precondition of independence – at least that the intellectual underpinnings of resistance to colonialism are present in the literary archive for many decades before independence was achieved.