

*Settler Colonialism in Victorian Literature: Economics and Political Identity in the Networks of Empire*

By Philip Steer. Cambridge University Press.

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Reviewed by Grace Moore

At the beginning of his 1873 Australasian travelogue, Anthony Trollope observed that the future prospects of Australia and New Zealand “involved the happiness of millions to come of English-speaking men and women” while noting that “it has been impossible to avoid speculations as to their future prospects”. Philip Steer’s carefully-argued study of colonial settler writing in and about the Antipodes considers the cultural exchange between the Australasian colonies and the mother country, noting the importance of colonial culture to English realist writing. Positioning his work as a “sustained reckoning with Edward Gibbon Wakefield”, for Steer “the evolving frenzy of exploitation and transformation in the settler colonies put pressure on metropolitan forms of the novel and political economy, and provided new conceptual vocabularies for understanding British society and subjectivity”. In order to examine some of this pressure, Steer considers a range of authors—Victorian celebrities like Charles Dickens and Anthony Trollope, alongside lesser-known writers including Catherine Spence and Henry Crocker Marriott Watson. He also seeks to re-evaluate how settler colonialism sits within Victorian writing generally, making a very convincing case for reconsidering the sense of overseas settlements as simply convenient places to which problematic characters might be banished.

Steer begins his study with a detailed examination of Dickens’s *Great Expectations*, reminding us that by the time the novel was published, the settler population of Australia was more than one million people. In a long chapter underpinned by an engagement with Wakefield’s colonial ideals, he contends that the presence of colonial plots in novels like *David Copperfield* illustrates an emerging capacity for Dickens—and, because of the scale of his influence, for other writers too—to conceive of British culture and society on the other side of the world. He suggests a dynamic exchange between Britain and Australia, arguing that “the renewal of settler colonization helped coproduce Victorian ideas of character formation”. Considering the intersection of the interests of the novel with those of political economy, Steer argues that these connections are most pronounced in the settler colony, largely because of the challenges associated with re-creating a “British” society in very different environmental conditions on the other side of the world.

Using the example of *David Copperfield*, Steer argues that its “colonial addendum”, which sees the feckless Micawber family relocated to Port Middle Bay (generally agreed to be Melbourne), Australia, is evidence of the transposition of Wakefield’s belief in the colony as an extension of Britain. To read the novel’s colonial ending in this way involves a significant downplaying of the plot’s comedic properties, wherein a cluster of characters constitutionally unequipped to prosper at home (including the timid and ineffective teacher, Mr. Mell) rise to the greatest heights when transplanted to the colonies. While suggesting that “the novel is amused by Mrs. Micawber’s rhetoric”, Steer suggests that it somehow endorses her assertion that Mr. Micawber’s relocation will serve to “strengthen, not to weaken, the connexion between yourself and Albion”, which is to dismiss Dickens’s parody of the irresponsibly circulated idea that *anyone*—even Mr. Micawber—might be successful in Australia.

One of the real pleasures of *Settler Colonialism in Victoria Literature* is its attentiveness to landscape and the complicated aesthetic relationship that many migrants experienced with their new environments. Following the approach taken by Susan K. Martin and Kylie Mirmohamadi in their study of reading Dickens in colonial Australia, Steer addresses the role of the novel in colonial character formation. As Steer notes, Scott's Waverley novels offered a type of lens through which settlers could mediate their new environment and define their remote British subjectivity. For Steer, the Australasian gold rushes threw up a series of "formal challenges" as a result of the various cultural, socioeconomic and other networks to arise as literary and artistic figures, including Henry Kingsley and Richard Horne, gravitated to the goldfields. Folding historians, artists and political economists into his incisive discussion to create a vivid sense of the cultural landscape and how it inflected the generic properties of both colonial literature and the English novel.

The highly energetic Victorian novelist, journalist and translator, William Howitt offers an especially interesting case study of what Steer terms "colonial comparison", largely because Howitt remained wedded to northern-hemisphere notions of the picturesque, despite two years in the gold diggings. In addition to his many articles for the periodical press about life in Australia, Howitt continued to pen novels set in the bush after his return to England, and was influential in shaping readerly perceptions of the place. Steer notes in a detailed analysis of *Land, Labour and Gold* (1855), that for Howitt cultivation of both the landscape and the mind is a crucial aspect of settler success. According to Howitt, gold-diggers were "bad colonists" because they lacked a sense of the picturesque, a position he shared with Anthony Trollope, who was critical of the mess created through extraction in his 1879 novel, *John Caldigate*. Importantly, Howitt sees the excesses and vulgarity that he associates with the goldfields—despite the fact that he had himself travelled to Australia to look for gold—when he writes about the prosperity of Melbourne, one of several Australian cities to have grown and developed as a result of the massive fortunes to be made by successful prospectors.

Repugnant though he finds many aspects of life in the city, Howitt is, as Steer argues, compelled to acknowledge that riches have allowed Melbourne to assume a place at the forefront of modernity. Howitt's concession here creates a fascinating tension between the source of colonial wealth and the architectural and cultural projects that it could bankroll—a concern that infuses English novels like *Great Expectations*, which concern themselves with "tainted" colonial money and labour. Steer follows this tension through, suggesting that while Howitt asserted colonial progress in Australia—whereby England had re-fashioned itself overseas—the novelist's position was far shakier. This contradiction emerges largely through Howitt's acknowledgement of the connection between the "nomadic sociality of the diggings and the capitalist excesses of Melbourne" (105). This affirmation sits awkwardly alongside the type of stadialist history that Howitt was attempting to impose upon the city, and tensions of this kind are a crucial element of Steer's multi-layered argument.

The Australian section of the study closes with a consideration of W.S. Jevons (who, as Steer reminds us, spent five years in the colony and toured the goldfields) and Anthony Trollope. Highlighting the importance of gold as a sensational fictional trope, Steer brings together Jevons's *Theory of Political Economy* and Trollope's *John Caldigate* to consider how metropolitan individualism in fiction and in fact shifted as settlement and notions of Englishness expanded. Offering a fascinating discussion of the transience of settler towns, Steer adds a layer of complexity to Paul Delany's assertion of Trollope's emotional investment in the continuity of landed property. Drawing on Trollope's travelogue *Australia and New*

*Zealand* (1873) to supplement his readings of the novel, Steer contends that the author uses Australian gold as a way of exploring the shortcomings of Lockean individualism in the face of an increasingly globalized Britishness. He continues to make a case for reading *John Caldigate* as a revision of *Can you Forgive Her?* (1865), an interpretive strategy that Helen Lucy Blythe has also deployed in her reading of Trollope's euthanasia novel *The Fixed Period* (1882) as an act of atonement for the racism of his earlier New Zealand writings. Steer interprets *John Caldigate* as a story of reverse migration and colonial labour, in which the protagonist's gentlemanly status is at first threatened by colonial life, but later upheld by its profits, before moving to a provocative parallel with the colonial plot of *Great Expectations*.

Steer then refocuses on colonial New Zealand with a chapter on the entanglement of colonial debt and speculative utopian fiction, along with their connection to ideas of "Greater Britain". Using John Plotz's work on the settler need to maintain an English identity, Steer examines how Britishness was frequently asserted not only to support differences that licenced the suppression of Indigenous cultures, but also to support "the kind of commonalities that would allow metropolitan privileges to be turned to their advantage" (127). Steer considers the role of optimistic speculative fiction in cultivating ideas of a hopeful future for settler colonies, while at the same time considering how debt added complicated narratives of colonial prosperity. Arguing that in New Zealand the rhetoric of "Greater Britain" was harnessed to encourage investment in a progressive colony, Steer looks at Samuel Butler's New Zealand writings alongside the author's fiscal history, while highlighting the literary and financial risks associated with his time in the colony. He also confronts the issue of indentured Indigenous and Pacific Island labour in both Australia and New Zealand, and its implications for the sense of a settler "character", through an analysis of reputational credit and notions of Britishness.

A discussion of New Zealand *dystopian* fiction suggests that these more pessimistic visions of the future responded to discussions surrounding Julius Vogel's borrowing policies and fears surrounding New Zealand's burden of debt. These concerns, Steer suggests, make their way into Trollope's *The Fixed Period*, a work that grapples with colonial genocide and the discourse of proleptic elegy so often applied by settlers to Indigenous peoples. He also draws on an analysis of Vogel's own work of speculative utopianism, *Anno Domini 2000; or Woman's Destiny* (1889), a publication that was itself a piece of speculation, insofar as Vogel and his publisher miscalculated the level of interest that the novel would attract. The chapter closes with an insightful consideration of Marriott Watson's writing, particularly his *Decline and Fall of the British Empire* (1890), focussing on reverse settler colonization.

The final chapter looks at invasion novels and surplus population, putting Patrick Wolfe's notion of a "logic of elimination" to work to draw a poignant Malthusian parallel between the "havoc" that settler society wreaked on Indigenous populations and the sacrifice of expendable settler men on European battlefields during the First World War. As Steer expresses it, taking what he sees as the "intimacy between settlement and death", which became visible in the catastrophic 1915 Gallipoli campaign, "The fatal collision in Gallipoli of surplus value with romance—of political economy with literary form—therefore stands as one final grim skirmish at the borders of Britishness that constituted the Victorian settler empire". Steer's discussion takes in John Masefield's *Gallipoli* (1916), and considers the mobilization of chivalric and classical rhetoric to romanticize an act of carnage, just as the settler community had itself attempted to sentimentalize the "melting away" of Indigenous populations.

Although he remarks in his conclusion that he “never was very good at theory”, Steer adeptly weaves sociological, literary and economic theory throughout his analysis, tracking the entanglement of intellectual, literary and commodity culture to offer a rich and nuanced account of circulating influence, via a “network of mobile writers”. Importantly, he reminds his readers in his sensitive and self-reflexive conclusion that the issues he raises cannot simply be consigned to the field of Victorian studies. Rather, they leave legacies which continue to shape life in Australia and New Zealand today, and with which we must all engage. This is a superbly intelligent and wonderfully researched book, showcasing the intricacy of colonial connectedness.