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## REWRITING THE COLONIAL ADVENTURE?

Robert Dixon. *Writing the Colonial Adventure: Race, Gender and Nation in Anglo-Australian Popular Fiction, 1875-1914*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

Ripping yarns are adventure stories of varying levels of probability aimed at "boys of all ages" and characterised by action, excitement, and moral simplicity. In the English tradition they usually situate the hero in foreign parts and allow him to overcome a small group of depraved Europeans, or a much larger number of hostile non-Europeans, through permissible guile, superior technology or sheer British pluck. Despite their popularity with readers, they have never attracted much attention from historians and critics of adult fiction, or from the newer wave of children's literature specialists. The embarrassment surrounding other forms of romance has also been theirs. No one has found (or perhaps wanted to find) a way of taking them seriously.

Robert Dixon's *Writing the Colonial Adventure* seeks to redress that, mapping "the relations between elements in a complex ideological formation, involving imperialism, adventure, masculinity, Englishness and Australian nationhood" (1) inscribed in late Victorian adventure novels, and showing that their

morality is not quite as simple as it appears. Starting from Martin Green's argument that adventure fiction matters because it is a major means by which imperial ideals were propagated, Dixon goes on to extrapolate from the novels ideas of emergent nationalism which, in articulating their cohering self-image, inevitably raise the counter-spectres of the Other, the hybrid, the native. Being a settler colony, Federation white Australia was "trapped between a nostalgia for the purity of Englishness and the vortex of otherness that defines its opposition to Britain, yet which must be kept safely outside the boundaries of Australian civility" (11). The sensibility, in other words, wants to be English, but is reminded by the neighbours that it can no longer be, and that its values are fragile and vulnerable. Such an argument makes a lot of sense; where it might be challenged is in the assumption that Englishness is best figured in this model as pure. For largely strategic reasons colonial discourse analysis has tended to assume that, but the "purity" of the imperial deserves to be reexamined.

Models of nationalist discourse work well for some of the texts discussed, and to deal with others Dixon equips himself with feminist authorities (both Australian and American) and with psychoanalytic theories that allow frictionless passage between issues of gender and nation. Chapter 4 on *King Solomon's Mines* and its Australian successors is crucial to setting up this bridge and to developing an

explanation for the proliferation of fictional Australian "lost races" as a mediating term in the white Australian quest for identity. The lost races, Dixon argues, constitute a "second grotesque" — a marker of the "instability of the polarisation of Australians into white and black required by the discourse on nation" (64), and a personification of "a post-imperial paranoia about the loss of the metropolitan culture" (64). Not surprisingly, imperialism is identified throughout as an arm of patriarchy, and Australian adventure romances are read to reveal a cultural climate of racist brutality, materialist cupidity, and sexual anxiety.

Popular fiction is an impossibly disparate field, and Dixon triumphs in fusing so many different sub-groups into a coherent multi-stranded argument. There are chapters on sources and influences: Walter Scott's influence on Boldrewood, H. Rider Haggard's on texts by Ernest Favenc, George Firth Scott, Alexander Macdonald and William Sylvester Walker; chapters on motifs and sub-genres: the captivity narrative, invasion fiction; chapters on social issues: the New Woman. Some chapters, like that on empire crime fiction, aim at enormous coverage; others are devoted to just a couple of works by a single author like Louis Becke or Rosa Praed. One, that on the recently well-trawled captivity narrative, has difficulty finding examples.

Ironically, the impulse which pulls the disparate material into coherence is

the clinical identification of incoherence in the texts surveyed. It may be the inconsistency of Boldrewood's propertied aspirations (20), the evasiveness of frontier morality in a Becke story (131), Praed's "feminist" variations on the vampire motif (115), even the fact that Becke tended to write stories rather than novels (185, 201) — all these are offered as evidence of fundamental fragmentation in the imperial design. Eschewing any claim that the texts are "great literature" (8), the book reads with great success for "ambiguities," "paranoia," "anxieties," "grotesques," "instability," "irruptions."

Such a reading method affords the critic immense licence and Dixon clears further space for himself by adopting a feminist argument that an apparent failure of coherence in a text by a woman may be read as the result of enforced capitulation to outside constraints (i.e. publishers' demands) overlaying the subversive impulse of the text: "... in women's texts the wholeness of accepted forms is often contested by heterogeneity and fracture; ... gender signatures may be found precisely in those stagings of desire which ... take place outside the frame" (104). Fracture, then, is the hermeneutic fulcrum. If the text is by a male adventure writer, fracture is located to show the inherent anxiety of imperial triumphalism. If the text is by a female writer, though, fracture is located to show a triumphal subversion of the imperial (*read* patriarchal) hegemony.

One strand of Dixon's analysis is a psychoanalytic one, and his explications of erotic displacement (and its disavowal) in character and setting are always ingenious and often persuasive. There is, however, an overexuberance in the readings which vitiates some of the power of the argument. Wet, oozy passages through mountain ranges (76) are fair game, but some of indices of castration anxiety — being throttled (168), or dangling a limb in the water (140) — are less likely to command assent than puzzlement. In this discursive landscape, anything that sticks up is likely to be drafted as a symbol of castration anxiety; anything that does not suggests its disavowal.

Although the book makes no claim for the value of these texts in themselves, shreds of a concept of inherent worth flutter round the edges of the argument. Guy Boothby, Louis Becke and Fergus Hume are "major Australian writers" (2), while Frank Fox's *The Commonwealth Crisis* is "an unjustly neglected novel" (143). Given that Dixon discusses the novels precisely because they have "a conflictual economy which simultaneously displays and disavows the anxieties that produced them" (5) it is not clear what meaning "neglect" and "unjust" might have in this context.

The strength of accounts of nationalist (or other) discourse is that they are constructions of constructions — they re-narrate the narration of the nation — and therefore develop imaginative

theories and mappings. Their weakness occurs when they lose touch with the very history they seek to illuminate. The most satisfying readings of the novels in this book are those which are buttressed by historical framing, such as the discussion of Boldrewood's real-life aspirations and their fictional counterparts (20ff.), or the discussion of side-by-side polemic and fiction in the *Lone Hand* (143ff.). At other times the tail wags the dog, and enthusiastic pursuit of the argument backs history into some peculiar corners. Was the fiction market of the 1880s really "dominated by the exponents of masculine romance ... like H. Rider Haggard, Andrew Lang, Robert Louis Stevenson and Rolf Boldrewood" (103)? Not many London readers in 1885 would have recognised the names of Stevenson or Boldrewood before those of Mary Braddon, Ouida or George Meredith, and Andrew Lang was best known for book reviews, anthropological essays and fairy stories. If the preference of one writer (Louis Becke) for writing short stories "suggests the formal ... fragmentation of the adventure tale" (185), do Beatrice Grimshaw's Pacific novels of the same period "suggest" the adventure tale's simultaneous reintegration? (In Discoursalia, apparently, one swallow *does* make a summer.) Dixon's book finds many threats to masculine identity particularly through Asian contamination which is said to render men "unmanly" and feminised. But by the 1880s "manly" did not simply equate to "masculine" and "unmanly"

certainly did not equate to "feminine." As Dixon half-acknowledges (3) but then seems to forget, "manly" was a contraction of "gentlemanly" and connoted a sense of chivalry and self-denial rather than one of testosterone-marinated id. One may still want to argue that the Victorian neo-chivalric code was a self-deceiving repression, but the argument needs to be made, not just elided in an ahistorical way.

*Writing the Colonial Adventure* is a pioneering book which demonstrates how forgotten romance texts can be acutely interrogated and imaginatively re-narrated from the perspective of a century later. It is a subtle argument, always interesting, and astonishingly successful at threading quite diverse texts onto its analytical chain. The reader, however, may just occasionally wonder whether we are reading back to the historical culture of 1875–1914 or forwards to a new discursive Lemuria charmed into existence by the argument itself, and whether the rich harvest of "anxieties" may be less those of 1880s imperialism than those of 1990s academicism.

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## (TOO MANY) FAMILIAR VOICES

Irene Moores, ed. *Voices of Aboriginal Australia: Past, Present Future*. Butterfly Books, Springwood, NSW, 1995. 491pp. ISBN 0 947333 69 X

*Voices of Aboriginal Australia: Past, Present Future* makes an important contribution to the discussion of Aboriginal affairs. Compiled by Irene Moores for and with the assistance of the Aboriginal Deaths in Custody Watch Committee, it provides a forum for voices on such key interrelated concerns as Aboriginal history, Aboriginal deaths in custody, sovereignty, land rights and reconciliation. The collection utilises a broad range of sources — many of which have previously been published — including extracts from histories, literary works, life stories as well as newsletters, articles from newspapers and journals, poetry, petitions, speeches, addresses and interviews. The voices are divided, somewhat arbitrarily, into three sections: Past, Present, and Future.

Aboriginal voices are introduced with a foreword about the validity of Aboriginal English as a distinct language. A key motif in the collection is the spoken Aboriginal voice, and Moores refers to the fact that the voices in the collection "have all spoken and echoed together within living memory" (xvi). A number of