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Review of George Eliot and the British Empire

Nancy Henry

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In this fascinating and forcefully argued study, Nancy Henry addresses the kind of subject that has become the preserve of post-colonial criticism but does so in a way that challenges commonly held assumptions about the relations between empire and fiction in the Victorian period. Where post-colonial criticism tends to emphasize the determining power of the ideological and cultural forces to which individual writers were subordinate – in some cases seeing the novel as an inherently imperialist form, in others assuming the pervasive presence of an imperialist ideology – Henry puts the author and her own distinct experience firmly at the centre of the discussion. The crucial context here is the biographical one, in so far as it illuminates the larger framework in which lives were lived and actions undertaken. Persuasively arguing that British imperialism was a retrospective construction and that the Victorian experience of empire in the mid-nineteenth century was local and fragmented, Henry examines in detail George Eliot’s knowledge of, and relations to, Britain’s colonial expansion overseas between 1850 and 1880: what she read, what she wrote, how she reacted to the experience of Lewes’s sons in South Africa, and, most intriguingly, where she chose to invest the money she earned from her novels. Like many middle-class Victorians she had a stake in the empire which was, on the one hand, personal and emotional – through her involvement with the fate of the two younger Lewes boys – and, on the other, financial, through the investments she made, on the able professional advice of John Cross, in high-yield colonial stocks such as Indian railways (at the time of her death just under half her portfolio was made up of colonial stocks).

To focus on these aspects of George Eliot’s life is, as Henry can justifiably claim, to offer a new perspective, and in exploring the particularities of the novelist’s involvement with empire, this study presents a complex and differentiated picture that cannot be properly subsumed under any blanket notion of ‘imperialist ideology’. As a reader and reviewer of literature about the colonies George Eliot was sceptical about the reliability of travellers’ tales; as a stepmother of colonial emigrants and a colonial shareholder, she was concerned about the welfare of her family and her own financial well-being, and seemed to take a practical view of empire as a fact of life in Victorian Britain; in her later years she was on occasions explicitly critical of imperial expansion, unequivocally describing the Zulu War of 1879, for instance, as wicked and unjustifiable. There are inconsistencies and shifts of attitude here, and Henry explores the disjunction between George Eliot’s consistent adherence to a realist aesthetic that did not allow her to write directly about the colonial life she had never experienced, and the exigencies of social life that encouraged practical decisions (for example, to despatch the Lewes boys to South Africa on the assumption that they might do better there with their limited abilities than at home, and to invest in colonial stock) that were based on slight knowledge and abstract notions of ‘the colonies’. But if, in this respect, her fiction and her life were governed by different principles, this study carefully examines how they interact, and shows how George Eliot’s imagination and aesthetic principles were shaped by her different connections to empire. Her commitment to realism seems to have been reinforced by her reading of colonial literature whose veracity she doubted, and Henry argues that she applied to representations of the empire the same standards that she famously applied to representations of peasant life in
her review article ‘The Natural History of German Life’. The criticism of idealizing pastoral in that essay shows how alert she was to the kind of misrepresentation of marginalized groups that Edward Said sees as characteristic of the nineteenth-century colonial discourse he names Orientalism, and in her novels she is consistently aware of the treacherous power of representations that are divorced from lived experience. That awareness is implied, for example in Mordecai’s visionary conception of the Holy Land in Daniel Deronda, for George Eliot provides the grounds for a sceptical reading of that vision as one based entirely on religious texts and travellers’ tales and thus prey to the fallacy of all representations that merely reproduce other representations.

Realism is not the only issue, however, and as Henry moves deftly between the known, and lesser known, facts of George Eliot’s involvement with the empire and the substance of her fiction, other concerns are brought into sharp focus: the new possibilities opened up by colonialism and capitalism raise moral questions about how money is earned and people are valued which are addressed in ‘Brother Jacob’ and Silas Marner in particular, while her involvement in investment and emigration affect her conception of England and are related to her pre-occupation with migration between English regions and the problematic relationship of migrant figures like Marner, Lydgate, and Ladislaw to established communities. But it is with George Eliot’s last two works, Daniel Deronda and Impressions of Theophrastus Such, that questions of empire and imperialism are explicitly raised and confronted, and the analysis of these texts forms the crux of this study. As the editor of the most comprehensive edition of Impressions, Nancy Henry is well placed to demonstrate how this strange, and to many readers rebarbative, text begins to articulate a critical awareness of imperialism and the ideology that accompanies it. However, those who have less enthusiasm for Impressions than she has, may have preferred her final chapter to have kept its primary focus on Daniel Deronda and to have presented her own sustained reading of that novel. She has much that is illuminating to say about it, but chooses to do so through a running debate with post-colonial critics such as Susan Meyer and, pre-eminently, Edward Said. That debate is fascinating and Henry argues strongly against the notion that Deronda is a Zionist novel, maintaining that it incorporates a criticism of precisely that myth of an empty land that Said attributes to it. Even if she does not quite dispel the doubts about Deronda’s final mission and the assumptions behind it that some readers may have, she succeeds in showing up the simplifications involved in Said’s polemical view of the novel and the limitations of the post-colonial readings it has authorized. As this study reveals through its close attention to George Eliot’s actual involvement in colonialism, criticism of Deronda that simply searches for an imperialist ideology to condemn ignores her detailed understanding of the colonial connections of English middle-class life and distorts our understanding of the novel’s ‘mimetic and moral subtleties’ (113). Altogether this is a rich and fascinating book which throws bright new light on the novelist and her context, and it leaves the reader with glimpses of a George Eliot who may at times seem intriguingly unfamiliar, capable of copying out in her 1879 journal lines from Emily Brontë that convey her grief and despair at the death of Lewes – ‘No later light has lightened up my heaven’ – and then of calmly noting: ‘Gas Light and Coke shares sold £1200 for 2260’ (94).

John Rignall
University of Warwick