

Robert Dixon. **Writing the Colonial Adventure: Race, Gender and Nation in Anglo-Australian Popular Fiction, 1875-1914.** Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995. x, 228 pp, 10 ill.. Pb. £ ? ISBN 0-521-48439-1. Hb. £ 40.00. ISBN 0-521-48190-2.

In his book Dixon rightly complains that for too long Australian writing produced between 1875 and 1914 has been either valued or condemned in terms of nationalist historiography. Thus, he argues for the need to set aside both the nationalist bias against adventure stories and reservations about the low status of romance. Dixon shows that romance novels narrate the story of the nation by distinguishing it externally from other nations, and by inscribing on the texts an internal hierarchy of identities. He claims that Australia is narrated into being in a way that condemns it to a state of unstable hybridity - at once English and not English, and yet not stable enough to be equated with other, external identities like Aboriginal or Asian ones.

Dixon's book deals with the discursive construction of race, gender and nation in Anglo-Australian fiction. His starting point is the simultaneous emergence in late-Victorian Britain of the New Imperialism and the novel of imperial romance. Drawing on post-colonial, psychoanalytic and feminist theories, esp. on Edward Said's Orientalism (1985), Dixon argues that it was the task of the New Imperialism as an ideology and the adventure novel as an ideological form to resolve contradictions in the experience of imperialism.

The ten chapters each deal with a major genre of romance fiction, a major writer or a major theme. Chapter one establishes the beginnings of the adventure tradition in Australia with Rolf Boldrewood's appropriation of Scott's Waverley Novels in The Miner's Right (1890). In chapter 2 it is argued that the ethical dilemmas inherent in the adventure mode were overlaid by contested versions of an emergent national identity. As Boldrewood's Robbery under Arms (1888) demonstrates, this produced conflicting attitudes to the concepts of nation and empire. Following Hayden White and Fredric Jameson, Dixon argues in chapter three that fictional structures, in his case captivity narratives, "infect" other

forms of representation which claim to be objective, such as historical narratives. Chapter four examines numerous Australian imitations of a once very popular British adventure novel, Henry Rider Haggard's King Solomon's Mines (1885). Chapter five focuses on the lost-race romance, which defines gender and power by bringing the New Woman and the Coming Man into conflict. In chapter six Dixon uses Rosa Praed's occult romances to point out the close connections between feminism and spiritualism. Chapter seven examines texts that are set in the borderlands of the new Australian nation, trying to centre the nation by narrating the limits of its territory. Chapter eight deals with fiction of the first Commonwealth decade in which the new nation is invaded and its population "emasculated" by Asian powers. Chapter nine points to the importance of late-Victorian crime fiction for the narration of both national and imperial identities. The last chapter questions the apparent collapse of the adventure mode from within as the symptom of a malaise in imperialism that culminates in World War I.

Dixon presents a roughly chronological sequence of authors, texts and themes. He usually begins with an influential British pretext, then analyses relevant Australian follow-ups, which usually imitate and modify the British text. If necessary, he also refers to important British secondary sources, for example Patrick Brantlinger's Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism (1988). In doing so, he demonstrates convincingly, that the Australian attitude towards imperialism differs markedly from the British one (and also from the American), and that therefore the discursive strategies which work for the assessment of British novels might not be applicable to Australian texts. The overall impression which Dixon conveys is that the project of re-writing Australian history by using narrative forms of British novels is an extremely laborious one. He demonstrates this in a painstaking and very convincing way by pointing out the numerous formal and narratorial incongruities in the Australian texts. Dixon's line of argumentation is never boring, because he writes very fluently and elegantly combines details of a novel's content with revealing differences between the British original and the Australian remake. He also assesses secondary sources and always gives very convincing reasons why

an Australian author chooses to differ from his British predecessor.

What makes the book rewarding reading is that Dixon is extremely knowledgeable about British, American and Australian primary and secondary sources of the period. Thus he succeeds admirably in framing Australian writing within and especially against the British background. In this way he demonstrates that 'Anglo-Australian' fiction is not at all to be understood as inferior, just because it is derivative. On the contrary, he clearly points out the rejuvenating potential the reader will detect in any post-colonial fiction if he reads it 'against the grain', in his case against British imperialism.

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