

Travelling on the Margins: Gilbert Parker in Australia

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TRAVEL LITERATURE, consigned to the periphery of literary criticism a generation ago, now enjoys a widespread institutional acceptance reflected in publishers' lists, scholarly articles, and teaching anthologies. Given the influence of its editor and publisher, Paul Fussell's *The Norton Book of Travel* (1987) can perhaps serve as a marker of contemporary Anglo-American interest in this most malleable of genres, but, as with other areas of change often associated only with recent reassessments of genre, the current interest of metropolitan critics is anticipated by the national literary canons and criticism of post-colonial cultures. Canada provides an obvious example in the inclusion of three chapters on the literature of exploration and two on travel books from 1880 to 1960 in the first edition of the *Literary History of Canada* in 1965, and in the plethora of articles, reprints, and anthologized selections from travel books published over the twenty-five years since.

Not surprisingly, Canadian interest has most frequently focused on accounts by European or American travellers in Canada and, more recently, on reciprocating narratives of travel in those areas by Canadians.¹ Meanwhile, accounts of Canadian travel by visitors from other post-colonial cultures, such as Australia's A. G. Stephens or James F. Hogan, fail to find a place in Canadian bibliographies and consequently in Canadian literary history and criticism. Canadians writing of Australia, such as Norman Duncan and Gilbert Parker, have suffered a similar fate in Australian literary historiography, and although their fiction retains the interest of Canadian critics, their travel books remain unexamined

in either an Australian or Canadian context. Such omissions or exclusions reflect the combination of national and Euro-American biases characteristic of literary study in both Canada and Australia, and such blinkered vision can have significant consequences for the ways in which we construct literary history and for our assessment of individual careers. Not only do we miss the acerbic epithets of an incisive A. G. Stephens — “There exists in Canada a refreshing confidence in the power of Acts of Parliament to make people moral” (128) — but also we lose an important perspective on the literary and political commitments of a Canadian writer such as Parker if we fail to acknowledge and to locate an appropriate context for his first published book, *Round the Compass in Australia* (1892).

As J. C. Adams’ biography meticulously records, Parker spent four years in Australia before settling in London in 1890 for the last forty-two years of his life. In Sydney, he served as Associate Editor of the *Morning Herald*, saw two of his plays produced at Her Majesty’s Theatre, and was a prolific contributor of both poetry and prose to Australian journals of the day. He published his first fiction in the *Sydney Mail* in 1887, and when the *Centennial Magazine* was established in 1888 as part of the centennial celebrations of the arrival of the First Fleet, Parker supplied, as a proem to the first issue, five stanzas of poetic tribute to Australia’s future. While W. D. Lighthall was compiling his *Songs of the Great Dominion* (1889) as a companion volume to Douglas Sladen’s *A Century of Australian Song* (1888), Parker was reviewing Archibald Lampman’s *Among the Millet* for the *Sydney Morning Herald* (Adams 95), having already contributed an essay on “The Poets of Australia” to the *Illustrated Sydney News* two years earlier.

Acknowledged with a substantial entry in the *Dictionary of Australasian Biography* published in 1892, Parker then disappears from biobibliographical surveys of literature in Australia² and survives as a dim presence in Canadian and British literary historiography. Although he was knighted in 1902 for his services to literature in Canada, Parker is now largely forgotten by the culture that saw him placed fourth in a 1904 Montreal poll establishing the “most important living Canadians” (Adams 124). Of his

thirty-two novels and collections of stories, only *The Seats of the Mighty* (1896) is now in print, surviving as an infrequent presence on Canadian university courses. Parker's reputation was still strong enough in 1913 to warrant an eighteen-volume retrospective "imperial edition" from Scribners and to see a ten-volume "pocket edition" issued by Harrap's in London in 1926, but Canadian literary history considers him solely as a Canadian example of the imitative best-selling novelists associated with G. A. Henty and R. M. Ballantyne at the turn of the century. Thus, his status in Canada scarcely challenges his consignment to obscurity in Great Britain as a minor entry in the *Dictionary of National Biography*.

The consideration of Parker's career on an exclusively trans-Atlantic axis has been encouraged by his service as a member of the British House of Commons for eighteen years (including appointment to the Privy Council in 1916), his support for Joseph Chamberlain's dreams of an imperial federation, and his role as director of British propaganda in the United States during the First World War. Thus, although he returned to Canada throughout his life and was regarded as a representative Canadian voice in London, Parker's personal commitment to England, his insistent vision of Canada as part of the British Empire, and his subordination of Canadian stories and settings to the formulae of British popular fiction have encouraged dismissal of him as the colonial expatriate striving to be "seated with the mighty" in London. Yet, in considering Parker solely in relation to his early life in Canada and his later career in London, we ignore the achievement of *Round the Compass* and underestimate the interest of the beginning of his literary career in Sydney at a time that also saw George Grant publishing his "First Impressions of Australia" (1888), J. Castell Hopkins writing of *Links of Union Between Canada and Australia* (1890), and George Parkin meeting Parker in Sydney in 1889 to discuss buying *The Week* (published in Toronto), and to affirm on Australian soil their joint commitment "to work together with tongue and pen for Canada" (Parkin cited by Willison 115).

A standard distinction between the guide-book and the travel book stresses that "successful travel writing mediates between two poles: the individual things it describes on the one hand, and the larger theme that it is 'about' on the other" (Fussell 16). Thus,

commentators frequently stress that American, Australian, or Canadian travellers to Europe in the nineteenth century often found that “larger theme” in a search for a past; conversely, countries in the “new worlds” of either the northern or southern hemispheres could be seen as laboratories of the future. What have not been considered are the themes that could preoccupy a post-colonial traveller voyaging not to imperial centres but to another post-colonial culture.

Despite the prevailing Canadian view of Parker as the quintessential colonial tugging his forelock to the top of British society, he displays right from the opening pages of *Round the Compass in Australia* a self-conscious recognition of the significance of his own Canadian perspective. Thus the preface modestly suggests that

it is possible that this work may not be of less general interest because it is written by one, who, through many years of residence is familiar with the life and political conditions of the great sister colony, the Dominion of Canada. And Australia has been viewed from the standpoint of this knowledge. (viii)

The opening sentence of the main text asks “How shall we see Australia?” (3), but Parker has already answered this question in identifying his perspective as one defined by post-colonial comparisons with “the great sister colony, the Dominion of Canada.”³ Indeed, his “larger theme” becomes the shape of nationality in two post-colonial cultures, and a book ostensibly devoted to what it is to “be Australian” tells us at least as much about Parker’s ideas regarding what it is to “be Canadian.” What distinguishes his treatment of both of these topics is his resistance to Eurocentric definitions of singular national identities and his exploration of a more complex vision of hybrid cultures moving between pluralism and unity, region and nation, colony and Empire.

A concern with national identity is, of course, central to most travel writing from the earliest exploration narratives through *Robinson Crusoe* to the contemporary travel narrative. Surveying recent Australian short fiction in 1983, Frank Moorhouse argues that “‘stories from a journey’ is the most successfully practised short story genre in Australia,” and goes on to note that

travel is not only about encounters with foreign ways or the trying-on of foreign styles; it is an encounter with one’s nationality. A

traveller is stripped of nearly all identity through having long periods of being without back-home status, occupational identification and without a personal network. . . . So before personality can cautiously emerge, it is nationality, 'being Australian', which sets the shape of discourse and interaction. (2)

What makes the shape of Parker's discourse and interaction with Australia of some interest are, first, those elements which contrast sharply with British responses of the period, and, second, the complexity of Parker's vision in the genre of the travel book, given his later submission to the formulae and worst excesses of late nineteenth-century popular fiction in visions of quaint French-Canadians, picturesque noble savages, exotic "south sea folk" and "the true north strong and free."

The "prologue" to *Round the Compass* distinguishes Parker's work from that of predecessors who, though "men of culture, observation and literary skill" (3), offer a very restricted view:

the point of outlook has been, in many cases, a metropolitan city and the cheerful comfort which a club-house affords: a dinner at Government House, if the traveller is well accredited; a run into the country for a couple of hundred miles; an excursion to the famous Gippsland Lakes and Big-tree Valleys; a picnic on the beautiful Hawkesbury River; a look at Broken Hill, perhaps, a glimpse of a sugar plantation; a trip to the Jenolan Caves; the exploration of Sydney Harbour; and the thing is done. (3)

In contrast to the southeastern arc around which other travellers have moved through "the spots where the clubs and comforts are" (4), Parker's narrator positions himself on isolated Mount Stuart in Western Australia for a panoramic introduction. Only then can he hope that "the reader should now be ready to interpret, with a sense of proportion and conception of broad conditions, the scenario of Australian life which I shall briefly [447 pages!] sketch hereafter" (16). Parker's emphasis falls consistently on interpretation over "fact," on proportion and context. He stresses the provisional quality of his "scenario" even as he exploits the documentary strategies of realistic narrative and takes pride in the combination of research and personal observation that may enable him to show "the stuff of which Australia was made" (17).

In a 1965 article surveying the work of European visitors to Australia in the years between 1880 and 1900, Michael Saclier

and Shirley Storrier comment on the prominent weaknesses of many of these accounts: "superficiality, sweeping generalisation, the recording of facts of doubtful veracity" (213), and "eyes, wherever they were turned, [which] could in any case see little but England in Australia" (215). Dominating the tone of Parker's book, on the other hand, is earnestness, tentativeness, and deliberative self-consciousness. Thus, despite his pride in his "four years' travel and responsible inquiry in Australia as the Special Commissioner of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the *Times* of that country" (4), he asserts on the same page that "it is . . . six years, or five years, at least, on which estimation must be made" (4).

In contrast to the reflections of the "casual traveller who thinks it pleasanter to write praise than history" (5), Parker insists that he will directly address Australia's natural extremes and social paradoxes. Thus, the first two chapters of *Round the Compass* provide "Glimpses of Australian Life: In Time of Flood" and "Glimpses of Australian Life: In Times of Drought." Next come three chapters presenting general remarks on "Rural Australia" and two on "Urban Australia" in which Parker contributes another perspective to Australian histories on the "legend of the nineties" that associates with the interior "the influences really Australian . . . the special characteristics which may be recognised as peculiar to this southern continent" (3): "In the cities so much English influence is working that we do not catch the most distinct outlines of the Australian. But where the influences of climate, soil and natural movement are at work beyond the cities, there we get the sharp contour of a century of Australian growth" (80). Part II of the book devotes thirteen chapters to essays on specific topics of interest in relation to the various regions of the continent, those themes linked to the obsessions of Parker's Canada in the 1880s: landscape, railways, and inter-regional communication.

Unlike so many British travellers of the era, Parker returns again and again to the presumptuousness of the travel book's attempt "to pierce the heart of the country" (17). Thus he claims no more than "glimpses" and "impressions" and repeatedly acknowledges the limits of his information and understanding. To Canadian critics constructing literary canons earlier in this century, Parker's book must have seemed to trail off weakly and to betray its origins

in a series of essays written for newspaper and magazine publication: its final chapter yokes together two essays under the title "Stray Papers: Art Notes — Frontier Life." Yet, in an era of post-modern and post-colonial contexts, Parker's refusal to echo the triumphant conclusions of British visitors provides evidence of a becoming resistance to closure. The focus on art and life in this final title encourages a re-reading of the entire book in relation to its self-consciousness regarding its own status as artifact, an exercise encouraged by its multiple references to other literary texts (particularly earlier accounts of travel and exploration), its exploitation of the strategies of fiction (whole chapters of dramatic scene-making and recorded dialogue), and its repeated emphasis on the multiple "performing selves" of the travelling narrator (whether as "enthusiastic spectator," "commissioned traveller," "the Unofficial One," or "the Traveller"). Not surprisingly, the narrator acknowledges that "sometimes I find it hard to turn from the novelist's view" (287).

The book's self-consciousness, contrasting with the confidence of so many imperial travellers, also surfaces in its fascination with the mystery and power of naming. Writing of Queensland in 1889, Parker's narrator is astonished that local landmarks and plants remain nameless to "those who see them everyday. . . . Neither map nor man can help you in regard to many points on the coast, nor any person assist you regarding the flora" (271). When he later visits the gold-mines of Charters Towers, their "fantastic" and "suggestive" names fascinate him, breeding reflections on both the power and the arbitrariness of all such namings: "One is named because of some near or far-off association in the mind of the namer; some are christened, as it were, from the font of a haphazard nomenclature" (289). *Around the Compass* will itself end with a glossary "of words and phrases chiefly Australian" (6), including "goin' bung," "humpin' their bluey," and "knocking down his cheque" (446). That imperial and post-colonial perceptions differ on the issue of naming is suggested by a reviewer of Parker's book in *The Athenaeum* devoting most of his comments to this glossary and noting with significant apprehension that "the need for a glossary will, we fear, from year to year increase in all books dealing freely with colonial affairs" (Anon. 664).

If Parker displays the literary and linguistic self-consciousness one would expect of an elocutionist, journalist, and incipient novelist, his declared self-consciousness regarding nationality surfaces in inevitable explicit comparisons. His opening metaphor of Australia as a circle stands against the straight line of the transcontinental railway that Parker sees as central to an understanding of Canada. He repeatedly casts Australia as a frontier society of danger and heroism, likening it to the United States (Brisbane is the Topeka, Kansas, of Australia); Canadian society is in contrast a culture of "compromise" and domesticity:

"A wealthy Australian" is, in London, as usual a phrase as "A wealthy American". There are good reasons for this. Rich Australians make London their Mecca, as rich Americans do Paris. One seldom hears of a wealthy Canadian; yet Canada is older than Australia. The difference lies in the fact that Canada has risen from a base of agriculture; Australia from a base of mining, pastoral and planting life. Canada has far more homes. Australia more fortunes. The Canadian farmer with his hundred acres and a score of cows, lives in comfort; the Australian selector often exists in danger. (6)

Qualifying these generalizations by making regional distinctiveness the organizing principle for the second half of the book, Parker retains topicality for a reader a century later as he observes that "just as there are grave misconceptions of the Western Territories of Canada by politicians at Ottawa, so there is ignorance in the parliaments of Australia regarding the interior of the country" (64).

The focus on the overlapping claims of region and nation allows Parker to move from a discussion of responsible government for Western Australia in the final "regional" essay to a following chapter comparing and paying tribute to Sir John A. Macdonald and Sir Henry Parkes, fathers of national federation past and prospective. The complexity and mystery of the link between identity and place is now made explicit: "It is strange that a mountain range, an imaginary line, or a tract of plain country should make a difference in men; but it does. It is a difference of interest, of occupation, of motive, and of social and political environment, which shapes the mental habit, the accent and even the physical exterior" (225). The "strangeness" of the impact of region in the construc-

tion of the national self finds its extra-national complement in the complexity of Parker's mediation between nation and Empire.

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Throughout *Round the Compass*, Parker moves without explanation from an identification of himself as Canadian to a self-identification as a citizen of the British Empire. Like many of his contemporaries in both Australia and Canada, Parker takes for granted a conception of dual nationality in which a national identification with Australia or Canada is entirely compatible with continuing pride in British citizenship. That sense of a hybrid identity mediating among region, nation, and empire is what links Parker to the Canadian men of letters and public life who followed him to Australia in the years between 1888 and 1893. In their essays, addresses, and books dealing with their travels in Australia, George Grant, Sir George Parkin, and Sir Sandford Fleming reveal various reasons for their journeys, but, like Parker, all became involved in the debates fomented by the Imperial Federation League which had been established in 1884. Indeed, Parkin's visit in 1889 has been seen as marking "the zenith of Imperial Federation in Australia" (Blackton 11).

Although their opponents often cast them as puppets of British imperialist forces, Parker and his contemporaries insistently tried to make finer distinctions than either their British allies or their nationalist foes. Grant, who travelled with Parker from Sydney to Adelaide in 1888, spoke for imperialism in both Canada and Australia but consistently stressed that Canadians were "determined to be the peers and not the dependents of their fellow-citizens in the British Islands" (*Imperial Federation* 4). His "First Impressions of Australia" begins with the suggestion that the reflections of the traveller can have some value for the native as reminders "that there are other standards and other centres than those which he may think absolute and universal" (318); he mocks arrogant imperialists and warns nationalist republicans with the observation that a "full-bodied, finely-flavoured sense of superiority to the rest of the world is to be found in perfection in England alone, but there is some of it in every country" (318).⁴ Even George Parkin, whose visit to Australia was sponsored by branches of the Imperial

Federation League, could argue that "so far from Imperial meaning Imperialism, I would say that the chief object of the Federation League is to destroy Imperialism, . . . because we seek to introduce, more than ever has been done before, Colonial advice and opinion into the management of national affairs" (32). Addressing Australians, the Canadians insistently counter British assumptions equating imperialism with colonialism and nationalism with independence as they argue for the realization of nationhood within the empire. Thus, all of them saw Australian federation as a necessary first step in a movement towards imperial federation, but, as Parker argues, republican insistence on "Australia for the Australians" had to be seen as "erring in extremity as the British politician does when he claims Australia as a heritage of the British race. Between the two extremes there is a point of union and justice" (411).

In the age of Kipling, imperialism was, of course, the repeated theme of British travellers of the era, an illustrative title being Blouet's *John Bull and Co., The Great Colonial Branches of the Firm* (1894); the most recent Canadian study of these books (Moyles and Owram) suggests in its title the limits of the dominant British vision: *Imperial Dreams and Colonial Realities. British Views of Canada 1880-1914* (1988). The imperial dreams of Parker and his Canadian contemporaries differed significantly from those of the British travellers because they saw different "colonial realities," the more complex "realities" tentatively illuminated in an Australian context in Parker's *Round the Compass*. The very presence in Australia of Parker, Grant, Fleming, and others reflected a realignment involving direct contact between colonies and dominions that could pay homage to Great Britain even as it excluded the Colonial Office. Soon after these Canadians completed their Australian travels, novelist J. F. Hogan chronicled a reciprocal journey in his account of his return to Australia after a seven-year absence in Britain. In *The Sister Dominions. Through Canada to Australia by the New Imperial Highway* (1896), the "imperial highway" combines the resources of the Canadian Pacific Railway and the recently established Vancouver-to-Sydney line of passenger steamships.

Just as Parker and his contemporaries were fascinated by the political and cultural realignments made possible by railways and by trans-Pacific telegraph lines and steamers, contemporary post-colonialist critics locate alternatives to either a monistic nationalism or an appropriating universalism in comparative cross-cultural study. Historians of Parker's era point a similar direction in *The Rise of Colonial Nationalism. Australia, New Zealand, Canada and South Africa first assert their nationalities 1880-1914* (1988). Eddy and Schreuder, the editors of this volume, note that the work of the contributors is "distinguished by a different perspective from that often adopted in dealing with the colonisation aspects of empire. The view here is *not* from the windows of the British Colonial Office" (9). As a corrective to reductive polarisations of national and imperial perspectives, the contributors stress ambivalence, ambiguity, and the conditional character of both national and imperial attachments in the post-colonial societies under consideration.

In this context, *Round the Compass* is of interest for the way in which it both reinforces and challenges received ideas relating to social identity and to the literary conventions and cultural coding of earlier travel books on Australia. Parker can characterize Australia as "this Greater Britain" (4) and can repeatedly appeal to "the latent strength and the conquering faculty of the Anglo-Saxon race" (142); following the comforting strategies of his contemporaries, he can characterize the Aboriginal victims of the British imperial mission as "a fading people, upon whose lands another race have made dstraint" (28), another chapter in "the same bitter story of all conquered and conquering peoples" (27). Such sentimental pieties enable *Round the Compass* to move swiftly to an argument obliterating the Aboriginal presence and seeing Australia as "at base English in idiom, custom and political practice" (86). Yet, Parker immediately qualifies this assertion by stressing that "the superstructure rising from this base has some configurations not English," and in the text of *Round the Compass* he narrates in careful and tentatively presented detail the multiple and complex influences and inheritances he perceives at work in Australia. Most of Parker's fiction simply adheres to the received conventions of some of the most popular fiction of his day, but, in this

first book, what Christopher Mulvey characterizes as “the chronic insecurity” (xiii) of the travel book as form offered a freedom to Parker’s obvious gifts as a writer which makes *Round the Compass* the most interesting book he ever wrote and one of potential interest to both Australian and Canadian readers in an era of post-colonial readings and re-assessments.

NOTES

- ¹ Recent book-length studies in each area include those cited below under Moyles and Owram, Doyle, and Kröller.
- ² Having explicitly excluded Parker in his introduction to *Australian Literature From Its Beginnings to 1935*, E. Morris Miller does provide an entry for him in a section headed “Anthology and Miscellany”; the main reference for *Cumner’s Son and Other South Sea Folk* is followed by a note stating that “Parker contributed another Australian short story, ‘A Castaway of the South’ to *The English Illustrated Magazine*, 1891-92 and in 1892 published *Round the Compass in Australia*. He is represented with poems in the *Centennial Magazine*, 1888-1890” (II 969).
- ³ In an 1889 letter to Sir Henry Parkes, Premier of New South Wales, Parker also stresses that his book on Australia will be written “from a comparatively fresh standpoint,” with his Canadian perspective amplified by his having seen “the working of colonization in Samoa, Tonga, Fiji and New Caledonia.”
- ⁴ A contemporary assessment of Grant’s lectures in Sydney stresses the particular appeal of his cross-cultural perspective: “Principal Grant has been giving us his opinions on Australia from a Canadian visitor’s point of view in a candid and pleasant fashion, which is interesting, even if the opinions themselves are not always favourable. It does us no harm to learn from our visitors what they think about us, and how our people and their ways and means of existence strike the intelligent foreigner. Principal Grant is not a foreigner exactly, of course, since he is a colonist like ourselves, and the link thus existing renders what he has to say the more valuable from our point of view” (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 September 1888: 13).

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