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SECTION: COLONIAL NETWORKS

Reading by Chance in a World of Wandering Texts

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Introduction

The dwelling was dismantled; but we could see a white man had lived there not very long ago. There remained a rude table – a plank on two posts; a heap of rubbish reposed in a dark corner, and by the door I picked up a book. It had lost its covers, and the pages had been thumbed into a state of extremely dirty softness; but the back had been lovingly stitched afresh with white cotton thread, which looked clean yet. It was an extraordinary find. Its title was, *An Inquiry into some Points of Seamanship*, by a man Towser, Towson – some such name – Master in his Majesty’s Navy. The matter looked dreary reading enough...¹

The lucky reader is Marlow, on his way to the Inner Station, and Joseph Conrad has exaggerated the dreariness of the title he is most likely to have had in mind.²

Observations on Some Points of Seamanship (1824) in fact contains no dull diagrams or ‘repulsive tables of figures’, and it was by Anselm John Griffiths – though that name lacks the stolid, workmanlike thud of Towser, or Towson.³ It is of course this very same dutiful, professional quality that so ‘enthalls’ Marlow, who cradles the dilapidated volume ‘tenderly’. To be greeted so suddenly, and so familiarly by an object from his European past – a past, the book’s antiquity implies, that is now dead to him – is certainly bewildering for the Congo navigator. Indeed, the book’s mere sixty years are made to seem, in its incongruous surroundings, like an indeterminate gulf of time. Technical manuals age rapidly in a fast-changing economy, and Griffiths’s handbook was made for an age of sail, not of steam.⁴ Rather than vindicating European superiority however, as the use of anachronism often does in colonial writing, the relic hints darkly at the perils awaiting the dubious rescue mission, which will miscarry in seconds should an error at the helm send the steamer jarring into a sandbank.⁵ Like Marlow, the *Points*

of Seamanship is a fish out of saltwater, and will offer its owner little help in the Congo's muddy reaches. Furthermore, there is the disturbing mystery of the forerunner. For the unknown 'white man' of whom only rubbish remains – Kurtz's boyish Russian disciple, as it turns out – has left notes in the book's margins. Nonetheless, it is a salutary encounter for Marlow: 'The simple old sailor, with his talk of chains and purchases, made me forget the jungle and the pilgrims in a delicious sensation of having come upon something unmistakably real'.⁶ He slips the book into his pocket and subsequently returns it to its owner; who, in an erotic echo of the 'delicious' private moment occasioned by its discovery, has to restrain himself from kissing Marlow with gratitude.

This essay is about some white men, and one white woman, and their old favourites – dog-eared volumes dear to them not, however, for the sake of childhood associations but because of serendipitous acquisition and long, sometimes enforced, intimacy between reader and text. It draws attention to the often skewed networks of publishing, piracy and circulation, that thrust those books into the hands of their unsuspecting readers, and as such uses colonial examples to propose a history of reading not entirely dependent on choice, but rather on chance, access, and circumstance. In his 1821 essay 'On Reading Old Books', Hazlitt wrote that such items are 'landmarks and guides in our journey through life', whose old boards 'bind together the different scattered divisions of our personal identity'. With a more sceptical turn of phrase, he compared them also to 'pegs and loops on which we can hang up, or from which we can take down, at pleasure, the wardrobe of a moral imagination'.⁷ In a sentence, my argument is that colonial life imposed a rather more pressing need on Europeans to gather up their divided identities into a personal, serviceable canon; and, conversely, a greater need for each of those books to function as a locked box in which to store one of several masks fastened on and taken off in the course of daily life. What I aim to show, from that premise, is how strain and circumstance could bring about a much more eclectic wardrobe of moral imagination than we would normally associate with the colonist's outlook, and how in an era when ideas as well as books were global commodities, literary harlequinade might ramify across the imperial system.

In setting out, I see myself already at risk of allowing my findings to be distorted by a certain class of sources. I have chosen deliberately not to consider the complex literary triangulation of a man like M.K. Gandhi, discovering the Bhagavad Gita through London theosophists or Tolstoy through Johannesburg vegetarians. Instead, I focus on

the peculiarly intimate conversations that overseas Europeans describe pursuing with their books. A more serious problem is that the solitary imperial servant eking out a maudlin, drearily heroic existence with a few meagre home comforts is a powerful myth, whose contemporary influence is felt in many of the extracts to follow – which is why I have begun an essay that relies mostly on memoir and correspondence with fiction. Exemplary in their propagation of this myth are the stories and sketches of Sir Hugh Clifford, a civil servant and governor in Malaya, Borneo, Ceylon and West Africa, which often dwell on the miscellaneous and sometimes incongruous reading matter that sustains their lonely protagonists. The Bible is seldom among these books, but Clifford's young bachelors supply its want with a secular scripture of their own devising, most of all the hero of his 1897 novel *A Free-lance of To-day*:

Through all the vicissitudes of his journey he had contrived to keep his box of books with him. It was filled for the most part with old, well-thumbed volumes that had borne him company in many strange places. There was a Shakespeare, a Byron, a Tennyson, two or three of Thackeray's novels, Yule's *Marco Polo*, Prescott's *Conquests*, Dampier's *Voyages*, and an odd assortment of miscellaneous works. He knew most of them so well, had solaced so many hours with their comradeship, that their pages were to him like the faces of old friends, the printed words had the ring of familiar voices, most of the thoughts they shaped had become part of his own mental furniture.⁸

Maurice is a bank clerk at Singapore who, like Don Quixote before him, is inspired by histories of seventeenth-century Dutch and Portuguese adventurers to strike out as latter-day filibuster in a Sumatran princely state. Clifford thus makes use of a perennial novelistic trope – the clash of romance with reality – to touch on colonial masculinity and its nervous interplay of active and passive roles, physical versus mental regimens. It is appropriately at the end of this passage that Maurice, who reads always while stretched prone on his mattress, is first visited by the villainous degenerate Pâwang Ūteh, a European who scrapes a living by ministering to the fearful locals with his supposed magic powers. The description of the medicine-man's face, wasted by years in the jungle, is no accident: 'It was of a sickly yellow hue, discoloured by blotches like those seen upon the mildewed calf-binding of a book'.⁹ Maurice is thus confronted with what, perhaps, may come to him through over-much reading – or, in the terms I have borrowed from Hazlitt – in not hanging up the masks of his moral imagination in their proper place. By mentally performing and re-performing his narrow repertoire, he

'bind[s] together' an English identity that might otherwise disperse into 'scattered divisions'. But he is also exaggerating that identity into a legend of pluck and chivalry that, projected into his normal life, will either make of him a latter-day Raffles or Rajah Brooke, or propel him towards an absurd and futile death. Languid, bedtime reading can thus both sustain and betray imperial dreams, but it can never be dispensed with altogether. Another of Clifford's protagonists, in the story 'Alone' (1901), resolves to give up his soft-handed life and embarks on a manly, active, and almost immediately fatal adventure in sandalwood trade. His inspiration is the passage in Tennyson's 'Locksley Hall' in which the speaker fantasises about a life in the colonies, where he will 'take some savage woman' and rear a 'dusky race' of jungle children:

Iron-jointed, supple-sinew'd, they shall dive, and they shall run,
Catch the wild goat by the hair, and hurl their lances in the sun;
Whistle back the parrot's call, and leap the rainbows of the brooks,
Not with blinded eyesight poring over miserable books – ¹⁰

As any prior reader of Clifford would understand, this illiterate idyll bears little resemblance to the daily tedium of life in northern Borneo.

This should not be taken to suggest that such 'comradeship' with paper and print was only part of empire's myths, or anti-myths, and not a real experience. On the contrary, the historical record supplies numerous accounts of men who 'contrived' like Maurice to overload their baggage with books, or who shared Marlow's craving for black-letter reality. One thinks, comically, of Leonard Woolf arriving in Ceylon armed with seventy volumes of Voltaire; or, with awful wonder, of E.W. Swanton and his fellow-POWs who, after Clifford's Singapore was overcome by the Japanese invasion, obsessively thumbed the county scores recorded in a 1939 edition of *Wisden*.¹¹ But Clifford's treatment of the subject reminds us how the colonial encounter with a book – with familiar books, as we will consider first with reference to Dickens, but most of all with strange books – is committed to memoir in a peculiarly meta-literary way, by people especially given to reflecting on how reading had shaped, constrained or deformed their perhaps not very harmonious 'mental furniture'. This essay begins, in its first section, by addressing this idea in respect to familiar books. It offers a series of examples involving Dickens's colonial fandom, exploring the legitimate and illegitimate networks that made copies of his novels available overseas, where reading him – first in

groups, later in private – is an exercise in reconnecting to metropolitan culture. The second, longer section deals with the unsuspecting perusers of strange books, and thus approaches the issue of global readerships not through spread and volume but, more unconventionally, through unique, unrepeated circuits of people, texts, and thoughts that are sparked more or less by coincidence.

Hazlitt's remarks on the moral imagination take on a suggestive new layer of implication in the colonial context, and this is also the case with one final paradigm I would like to introduce. The theorist Wolfgang Iser described how the processing of all but the simplest texts gives rise, in the reader's mind, to 'an ever-expanding network of connections'.¹² Though his concept of the 'wandering viewpoint' will not be fully discussed until the second section, it speaks to Dickens as much as it does to my latter examples. I aim to derive new insight from Iser's 'wandering viewpoint' by applying it to a world of wandering texts.

Old Friends and Familiar Voices: The Communal versus Solitary Reading of Dickens

The export of books from Britain increased enormously during the course of the nineteenth century, customs receipts rising from a mere £35,841 in 1828 to £1,336,549 seventy years later.¹³ Moreover, the trade reshaped itself repeatedly, making this period one of flux and asymmetry in respect to the popularity or availability of certain books in certain countries. As John Barnes has described, there was a broad shift from British merchants speculatively consigning packages of books to distant shores, where the contents would be auctioned, to the emergence of substantial bookseller-publishers or wholesalers (such as Thacker in Calcutta, or George Robertson in Melbourne) who would choose what to import to their warehouses. The first unsuccessful attempt by a Home firm to produce cheap editions for colonial readers was John Murray in 1843. But Richard Bentley's Empire Library (established 1878) and above all Macmillan's Colonial Library (1886–1960), aided by the gradual enforcement of copyright, saw the worldwide proliferation of British literature increasingly brought under metropolitan control.¹⁴

There were, of course, parallel channels for the supply of readerly wants, and these perhaps made an even greater contribution to the shaping of these wants in the first place. In the transatlantic trade, piracy remained widespread before Congress passed the Chace Act in 1891, and it was almost another two decades before all loopholes were closed.¹⁵ Even within the British Empire, unauthorised reprints persisted long after initial attempts, beginning in 1847, to erect legal barriers. But if they ate into short-term profits, bold pirates undoubtedly played a role in establishing certain works in far-flung markets, and therefore also, indirectly, in shaping the patterns of consumption or traditions of reading through which individual authors were received in particular countries. India, for example, did not acquire a comprehensive and effective copyright law until 1914.¹⁶ Seventy-five years earlier, when Emily Eden was writing the letters to her sister in Britain later collected as *Up the Country* (1866), illicit editions of Dickens were both a practical economy and a vital means of keeping up-to-speed with ongoing serials. Ennui at Simla, in 1838, was relieved by the arrival of a box of books from 'Home' – though the pleasure thus vouchsafed, it turned out, was mainly that of *re-reading*:

To think of our only having yet received in this legal, direct manner, the eighteenth number of Pickwick! We finished it six months ago, because it is printed and reprinted at Calcutta from overland copies. Mais, je vous demande un peu – what should we have done, if we had waited for the lawful supply, to know Pickwick's end? I see you are making a great fuss about copyrights, etc., which I cannot understand as we see it only by bits and scraps; but I beg to announce that I am entirely for piracy and surreptitious and cheap editions, and an early American copy of an English novel for three rupees, instead of a late English one at twenty-two shillings.¹⁷

British or American books that came by 'overland mail' (via continental Europe to Trieste; thence to Cairo, and across the desert to the Red Sea coast) would have far outpaced cargoes rounding the Cape of Good Hope. Eden's account does not only retrace for us the routes of exchange whereby isolated imperial servants preserved a cultural link to the metropole (Dickens is called 'the agent for *Europe* fun', in a curiously mercantile turn of phrase).¹⁸ She also shows how the collective anticipation of each successive instalment fostered communities of readers. The weighty, costly items that arrived in her trunk were enjoyed in leisured privacy; but the Calcutta reprint was speedily digested and circulated, if not read aloud in a group. "Oliver Twist" we have

read, doled out in monthly parts nearly to the end', Eden told her sister six months later, 'and I like it very much – but "Nicholas Nickleby" still better. We have left off there, at Miss Petowker's marriage, and Mrs Crummles' walking tragically up the aisle "with a step and a stop," and the infant covered with flowers.'¹⁹ Examining contemporary accounts of Dickens's famous public readings, Helen Small remarks that a 'sense of unified experience is insistent', and for Eden, likewise, the joint consumption of each episode is a vital part of the station's communal life.²⁰ To paraphrase Hazlitt's terms, the exercise polishes the links in-group as well as individual identity (the inconstant supply of books also setting up 'landmarks' to punctuate a homogeneous calendar) and indeed, it may even have been Eden's intention to emulate public recitals of a global author, whose tours of distant colonies like Australia were contemplated and repeatedly rumoured but never fulfilled.²¹

Notwithstanding Eden's own position at the apex of the colonial hierarchy, the availability of print to a denizen of British India was a luxury unheard of in the cattle runs of country Victoria, where in desperate boredom the stockman James Demarr went over to a nearby sheep station to borrow the only book in the neighbourhood, Isaac Watts's *Logic: Or the Right Use of Reason* (1724).²² How this eighteenth-century textbook fetched up in the Australian bush is a mystery that will probably remain unsolved – a strolling pedlar is probable, but they do not leave stock ledgers. However, when Demarr did get hold of *Nicholas Nickleby* in 1841, two years after Eden and her friends had finished it in India, it came as a gift: a fellow rancher riding in from the head station and putting it into Demarr's hands 'with a joyful countenance'. In conditions of such scarcity, the imperative to share was still greater than Eden's, and men gathered the following night from around the district, both to hear the narration and to participate in eager discussion of plot and characters.²³ Such an anecdote dramatically restores truth and circumstance to Bret Harte's rather sentimental poem 'Dickens in Camp' (1870), which describes a roughneck party of Californian forty-niners putting their pickaxes aside when one of their number draws 'from his pack's scant treasure, / A hoarded volume':

And then, while round them shadows gathered faster,
And as the firelight fell,
He read aloud the book wherein the Master

Had writ of 'Little Nell.'²⁴

The wandering, battered, very likely pirated book as a focus for ritual sympathy is an image Harte is using entirely deliberately here to evoke the 'touch' sustained between Dickens and his readers around the world. Indeed, the poem was in fact intended as an elegy for the great author after his death at Gad's Hill in June 1870 – Harte supposedly dashing it off on hearing the fatal news by telegraph, even while a letter of commendation addressed to him from his dead idol was still in transit.

The news reached India in the same manner and, with a much more widespread and coordinated newspaper culture established in the country by 1870, it was journalists who led the collective mourning. However, Lockwood Kipling's article in *The Pioneer* (his son Rudyard was then four years old) strikes an altogether different note from Eden's 1830s narrative. 'For thirty years many out here have laughed and wept', he recalls, 'as he chose they should, over his inimitable mirth and imperishable pathos and, in dull up-country stations and travellers' bungalows, have beguiled weary days and tedious nights with his books'.²⁵ Lockwood's community of readers are poring over books, not 'bits and scraps', and they are alone. For Eden, *Oliver Twist* is enjoyed by 'everybody' – an offhand 'everybody' which occurs dozens of times in her narrative, and through either race or class barriers excludes at least as many as it includes in her intimate upcountry station. If a public subscription for Dickens were proposed in India, she feels certain, 'everybody' would contribute. By contrast, Lockwood is enjoining the mutual regrets of a larger, scattered, less homogeneous body of readers, drawing their solitary comfort from the knowledge that many distant colleagues are passing the tropic nights in the same manner. This is a somewhat counterintuitive trend: a larger population of readers (because now living individually, or in urban centres rather than predominantly in small gathered communities) and a greater availability of books, are actually conducive to a more erratic reading culture. Thus while their copies of Dickens were by 1870 more likely to be picked up cheap from a local vendor or railway bookstall, or met with by happenstance in a club or *daak* bungalow, their individual, interior experience appears more akin to Clifford's young men, or to Marlow's with his *Points of Seamanship*. And that is to say nothing of course of the even larger, native Indian public that sits reading between Lockwood's words, preparing for travel to London or cramming for examinations, and perhaps complaining – like one of his son's

future characters – of being a ‘Demnition Product’ who cannot end a sentence without quoting Dickens.²⁶ It is these individuals on their private trajectories, falling into step at some point with an equally itinerant author, and entering into intimate, ‘firsthand’ dialogue with him or her in spite of – or, in some cases, because of – their second- or even third- hand acquisition of the printed matter, who signify most readily what our line of enquiry might yield for the history of the book.

Strange Meetings: The Finder, the Forerunner, and the Anomalous Book

In *The Act of Reading*, Wolfgang Iser ruled that a text ‘offers guidance as to what is to be produced’, and therefore cannot itself be the product – the product, rather, is the result of a collaborative tension between text and reader. ‘[T]hat which is given has to be received, and the *way* in which it is received depends as much on the reader as on the text’.²⁷ Specifically, our singular inclinations and prejudices will guide our initial reception, and those elements which are most familiar to us will stand out and predominate – although, as we proceed, ‘alien associations’ may arise and disturb or overturn the structure we have begun to put in place.²⁸ As the previous section explored, for the colonial reader the familiar holds a special value; but, as will see, in some cases the collision and reconciliation of familiar with alien associations can hold greater value still. This model of the text as an unfolding event informs another of Iser’s postulates, the concept of the ‘wandering viewpoint’: as our eyes scan the pages of a book (his examples are chiefly novels), our viewpoint is constantly shifting, with prior viewpoints not being discarded but accumulating into a conglomerate perspective:

Thus, in the time-flow of the reading process, past and future continually converge in the present moment, and the synthesizing operations of the wandering viewpoint enable the text to pass through the reader’s mind as an ever-expanding network of connections. This also adds the dimension of space to that of time, for the accumulation of views and combinations gives us the illusion of depth and breadth, so that we have the impression that we are actually present in a real world.²⁹

Iser does not, however, attend closely to the extra-textual situation of the reader, especially in respect to readers who do not consume a work of literature near to its source of production, but who encounter it as a wandering text, perceived through their own ‘wandering perspective’ on its far margins of circulation. The European in the

colony, or for that matter the colonial subject who has migrated or been transported to a foreign node in a large imperial system, occupied a situation opening onto a dizzy variety of other vantages. For Lockwood's reader, absorption into the integral 'world' of a Dickens novel is a means of dreaming back to England (an England of the 1840s), and thus of bringing the immediate and disturbing space of the colony under control. But what happens when the book *found*, in some isolated locale with no other diversion available (a common enough situation), is not that which had been sought or expected? The discoverer of a chance volume cannot know what vista will open itself to him. A paucity of books makes readers peculiarly subject to the mysterious commodity flows, and other often inscrutable factors, that conspire to bring a given text to a foreign market – and thus meeting with strange books is akin to meeting strange people, on a cosmopolitan footing. Indeed, the analogy may be more fitting than we realise, given colonial readers' habits of humanising books, making 'old friends' of them, restoring to them the oral quality lost when reading became a solitary and silent exercise. Books of all kinds *speak* to people in this setting in a distinctive way, just as popular authors like Dickens are figured as conversing with his devotees across global space in a fervid and intimate manner.

As the figure of Marlow tenderly cradling the *Points of Seamanship* with which we began suggests, the meeting of a weary traveller with a misplaced book might have a peculiar resonance in colonial writing. But with the book also becoming an ever cheaper, more ephemeral and readily discardable item, chance acquisitions of this kind took place not only in fiction but in reality, and it is with the unpredictable ramifications of such events to which we now turn.

In 1915, the critic Arthur Quiller-Couch gave a lecture to the Royal Institution in Albemarle Street, choosing a time of worldwide conflict to come to grips with the mysteries of globalisation. He dwelt on the romance of historic trade routes: how was it that Richborough oysters were brought live to the dining couches of imperial Rome? Whence came the murex to dye the Emperor's cloak purple? As he brings his audience up through the layered generations of empire to the present day, however, Quiller-Couch's interest is not in comestibles but in 'The Commerce of Thought'. He begs pardon for a story given to him by a young friend, an engineer in British Columbia:

He had been constructing a large dam on the edge of a forest, himself the only European, with a gang of Japanese labourers. But the rains proved so torrential, washing down the sides of the dam as fast as they were heaped, and half drowning the diggers, that at length the whole party sought shelter in the woods. There, as he searched about, my young engineer came upon a log-shanty, doorless, abandoned, empty, save for two pathetic objects left on the mud floor – the one a burst kettle, the other a ‘soiled copy’ (as the booksellers say) of one of my most unpopular novels.³⁰

‘Q’, as he was known to a generation of readers, does not go so far as to reveal the title of the unloved book. His shipwreck and Spanish Main yarns like *Dead Man’s Rock* (1887) and *Poison Island* (1907) are probably in the clear; *The Blue Pavilions* (1891), *Major Vigoureux* (1907) and *Brother Copas* (1911) are likely candidates. In any case we can imagine a lightweight edition, cheap to print and distribute around the world – perhaps, even, a bootleg copy put out by a New York or Boston press. Of greater import for the speaker is what he perceives as a furtive, almost clandestine transmission of texts, symptomatic of the ‘volatile’ and ‘fugacious’ nature of ‘the wanderings, alightings, fertilizings of man’s thought’. ‘[M]ore secret and subtle and mysterious in operation even than the vagaries of seeds’, Quiller-Couch tells his audience, is the propagation of human knowledge, and the anecdote serves as a touchstone for a series of examples of cross-pollination.³¹ Particular emphasis is given to comparative mythology, and the structural similarities of fairytales across distant cultures – a tendency Quiller-Couch, it seems, is inclined to attribute to migration rather than to parallel development. Appropriately, 1915 saw the publication of the fifth and final volume of *The Golden Bough*, though Frazer’s work, and that of the Folklore Society (established 1878) would have been within his audience’s frame of reference since at least the turn of the century.

Perhaps, for the sake of the story’s ‘fugacious’ suggestiveness, Q or his friend are also allowing poetic license to sharpen the Canadian backwoodsman’s exquisite sense of bathos, in choosing to leave the overblown bombast of an English romance to keep company with a burst kettle. In any case, the author shrugs off his chagrin handsomely: ‘I – who can neither make nor mend kettles – own to a thrill of pride to belong to a calling that can fling the *other thing* so far; and nurse a hope that the book did, in its hour, cheer rather than dispirit that unknown dweller in the wilderness’.³² The solitariness of the situation, and presence, as in *Heart of Darkness*, of a forerunner-reader is key to the anecdote’s effectiveness. Here we have the relics of a man who in his time too, no doubt, was ‘the only European’ in the forest; who has uprooted and

committed himself to new markets as light-footedly as the paperback; who is perhaps now dead, or even murdered – though not for his library. Here he solaced himself with metropolitan romances as a distraction from the isolation and seediness of his authentic imperial adventure, just as his descendant may now seek like relief from bossing Japanese coolies in the mud. Who can say what exalted or what base thoughts he confided to that sixpenny volume, or whether – if Quiller-Couch is perhaps concealing, from himself, another meaning of ‘soiled’ – he merely tore the thing up for toilet paper.

Isolation and boredom certainly brought readers into contact, and even dog-eared intimacy, with some unexpected items (Emily Eden claims to have read the diaries, in twenty-one volumes, of the Duc de Saint-Simon at least three times over before the fortuitous arrival of her box of Dickens).³³ In mid-nineteenth century India, English-language imports and reprints were determined largely by school and university reading lists: set texts for Government schools circa 1852, for example, included *Hamlet*, *Othello* and *Macbeth*; *Paradise Lost*; *Otway's Venice Preserved*, Bacon's *Essays*, Johnson's *Rasselas*, and Pope's *Iliad*; Goldsmith, Addison and Adam Smith – the Romantic poets long remained a notable omission.³⁴ Imports undoubtedly diversified as the century progressed, but the fate of particular titles could still remain contingent on factors evasive to the book historian, such as the dumping of unsold or second-hand stock into the Indian market, or simply the whims and personal luggage of individuals.

In such an environment, serendipitous encounters could set the finder off on eccentric tangents of thought. According to a neighbour, during the five years he spent in Vermont in his late twenties, Rudyard Kipling became possessed of ‘the conviction that he was the only man living’ with a sufficiently rounded perspective to write *The Great American Novel*.³⁵ His approval for the zesty idiom and spacious sense of landscape in American writing, however, stemmed not from his life in New England, but from coming across a broken copy of William Dean Howells's *Venetian Life* (1866) ‘in a rest house on the edge of the Indian desert’ – at a guess, specifically Tauchnitz's 1883 ‘British Authors’ edition.³⁶ ‘A wandering traveller must have left it behind in that wilderness’ he remarked, in an address sent to a commemorative gathering of Howells admirers in 1921, ‘and I remember I spent most of a hot night reading it by the light of an unsteady oil lamp’.³⁷ [REFERENCE IN NOTE] Of particular note is Kipling's recollection that Howells's sketches, written after three years' residence in the city during the Austrian occupation, ‘seemed to link up directly with the Middle Ages’.³⁸ For

this sojourn on ‘the edge of the Indian desert’ can only be referring to Kipling’s tour of Rajputana in late 1887, in which he too was investigating small states kept under the tutelage of a foreign power, comparatively insulated from the nineteenth century, and with a reputation for decadence and cruelty.

Howells dwells on the ‘peerless strangeness’ of Venice, within whose antique fabric one jars every so often on some ‘anomaly of modern life’, and – figuring the city in Eastern terms – on the foreign visitor’s difficulty in seeing beyond a distorting veil made up of prejudice, romance, and Byron.³⁹ The emphasis on observation and the play of light presumably appealed to the graphically-minded Kipling, and may have prompted some of the various references to Ruskin and painting interspersed throughout the travel letters that emerged from his journey, later collected as *Letters of Marque* (1891).⁴⁰ Most of all, *Venetian Life* appears to have sharpened the fascination, and fear, he was already exhibiting for cosmopolitan existence: ‘It dealt with a system of housekeeping and manners of domestics almost as casual and unrelated as their likes in our East, and it awakened in me – as in who knows how many young men since? – a deep desire to know this city of mixed nationalities and fantastic lives described by this Consul of the United States’.⁴¹ On this journey, Kipling may well have already been meditating the much longer trip he would undertake sixteen months later to Burma, China and across the Pacific to America, in pursuit of ‘cities and men’ – and, as it turned out in Japan, in hot pursuit of pirate publishers.⁴² Furthermore, though tinted by nostalgia, Kipling’s tribute to Howells is suggestive of his concern at the time with the distinctive identity of Anglo-Indians, and with the idioms and slang through which they sought to define and uphold their *groundedness* in Indian soil. He goes on to reveal that Howells’s novels *A Modern Instance* (1882) and *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885) were read aloud with his parents and sister at Lahore, and that they were a family ‘fairly conversant with American literature’ – the word conversant seeming to imply a stake, from their marginal vantage, in a global literary dialogue. ‘Here, to us, was a new world altogether – a large undoctored view into lives which did not concern or refer themselves for judgment to any foreign canon or comparison, but moved in their proper, national orbit, beneath their own skies and among their own surroundings’.⁴³

Kipling’s wandering viewpoint thus ranges, by smoky lamplight, across Rajasthan, Venice, and America. The most erratic trajectories are perhaps not brought about, however, by the jarring unexpectedness of the matter but through the reader’s

determination – in spite of Iser’s ‘alien associations’ – to assimilate everything to his or her outlook. Twenty years earlier, two isolated Europeans in another part of India bring us an example of the commerce of thought in its most haphazard workings. So little news did the *Times of India* have or care to report in its early years, it seems, that every month it would print the complete minutes of Asiatic Society meetings. About halfway through the February 1867 session, a new member was called upon to justify his presence with a display of scholarship: ‘Mr Rivett-Carnac, BCS, said he had much pleasure in complying with the request of the President that he should mention briefly the result of the recent examination of the groups of tumuli, supposed to be of Scythian origin, found in Central India’.⁴⁴ John Henry Rivett-Carnac was a senior colonial official – cotton commissioner, state opium agent, and sometime patron of the Kipling household (where he was known privately as Trivet-Claptrap).⁴⁵ He was also an amateur archaeologist, with a keen interest in the burial mounds that stud the hills west of Nagpur. Rivett-Carnac talks about these tombs after the manner of the Scottish or Irish antiquary, referring to ‘Cromlechs’ and ‘Kistvaens’. He was also personally invested in the hypothesis that the ancient warriors interred therein were of the same Aryan stock whose peregrinations across Eurasia supposedly gave rise to the Indo-European language group. The reasons why this notion was attractive to a certain cast of colonial mind are various and well-documented, but what is particularly curious about this incident is the nature of Rivett-Carnac’s proof, which he continued to expound in learned papers for decades after.⁴⁶ The discovery of arrows and spearheads was illustrative of burial customs linking these barrows to counterparts in Europe. But the tumuli also contained odd-shaped pieces of iron that the part-time antiquary insisted were stirrups and snaffles. Now, he announced to the assembled European and Indian intellectuals of Bombay, we suppose these tombs to testify to the arrival in India of those great nomadic horsemen, the Scythians – an ascription that was not incorrect, though somewhat oversimplified. But what proof do we have that the Scythians did indeed, as these iron implements suggest, bury with their chieftains the trappings of cavalry?

All doubts he may have had on this point, Rivett-Carnac announced, had been set at rest by some passages he had recently come across in that ‘grand old Legend of the North’, ‘The Saga of Frithiof the Bold’. A classic of Swedish Romanticism, this 1825 modernisation of an Icelandic epic was produced by the cantankerous bishop Esaias

Tegnér, and first translated into English in 1839 by the Liverpool-born professor George Stephens of Copenhagen University. In Stephens's copious notes, Rivett-Carnac remarks, 'it is mentioned that the burial customs of the Scandinavians, and Scythians were the same' (indeed, Stephens's notes already venture some comparative references to India).⁴⁷ Moreover, barrows similar to those he had examined in India are constantly mentioned in the poem. 'It was on the mounds raised over the remains of their chieftains that meetings on important occasions were held, and it was on the barrow of their father that the brothers of Ingeborg received Frithiof before he set off on the expedition . . . during which are the chief incidents of the poem.' In a gesture that is, perhaps, unique in the annals of the Bombay Asiatic Society, Rivett-Carnac then proceeded to recite the alliterative dirge with which good old King Ring is laid to rest amongst his horseflesh:

The hero-sprung sovereign
 Sits in his barrow;
 Battle blade by him,
 Buckler on arm:
 Chafing, his courser
 Close to his side neighs,
 Pawing with gold hoof
 The earth-girded grave.

The government of Russia, always Britain's Asian rival, was likewise rapidly excavating tumuli on the steppes of Tartary, and thus, Rivett-Carnac concluded there are 'great hopes . . . that a complete chain might be formed by which the inroads of these early tribes could be clearly traced'.⁴⁸

Seemingly, it did not occur to Rivett-Carnac that the *sturm und drang* imagination of a nineteenth-century bishop might not fully reflect the conditions of the early middle ages. But, in any case, how did he uncover this artefact of romantic nationalism? As it happens, the agent of transmission was that most unsentimentally modern of figures, a speculator and railway contractor. The library of Linnaeus University in Sweden holds the personal papers and business archive of Professor Stephens's son, Joseph Samuel Frithioff Stephens, who made a fortune building railways and cotton-presses in the Bombay Presidency. The younger Stephens kept a copy of his namesake *Frithiofs Saga*

(presumably brought to India in his luggage) in his upcountry bungalow, and in February 1867 he informed his father that he had lent it to Mr Swan, the District Traffic Manager.⁴⁹ And it was while sitting on Swan's shelves in Burhanpur that the book crossed paths with Rivett-Carnac, who became so enamoured of its stodgy verses that he had the volume rebound, carried it about with him and, according to a subsequent letter, learned part of it by heart. Joseph Stephens continued to send his father's publications, such as *The Old-Northern runic monuments of Scandinavia and England* (date), to the cotton commissioner who oversaw their installation in the Asiatic Society library, while the professor's own comparative, wandering gaze was given renewed energy by the dialogue.⁵⁰ For the hard-headed contractor, his own chief interest in the matter may have been the invitation he received to join Rivett-Carnac's party at the Akola Exhibition of 1868 – thus elevating him at a stroke through several tiers in the hierarchy of Presidency society, and giving him a large audience for his demonstrations and salesmanship of a rather different Swedish innovation: dynamite.⁵¹

It is always more satisfying to find something than to purchase it – hence the popularity, as Elaine Freedgood remarks, of even overpriced shops marketing curios that 'can be convincingly stripped of randomness'. The finds I have described came about more or less by chance, but there is an attempt in all three to plant, in Freedgood's terms, *ideas* within these *things*.⁵² As narrator Kipling and Quiller-Couch both attempt to ascribe meaning to the encounter while Rivett-Carnac, like Marlow, is inclined seemingly to deny the randomness of the event, and to see it even in a providential light. The bizarre zig-zag of cultural interchange in which he participates is illustrative, moreover, of a broader commerce across the empire – not just of thought, but of myth. The era that we might bracket between the election of Max Müller to a fellowship in comparative philology at Oxford in 1858, and the publication of the first two volumes of *The Golden Bough* in 1890 was one in which legends might be traded, reshaped, and married through inspired if often doubtful analogies. It is a freebooting commerce, often untrammelled by the regulatory oversight that would be imposed by modern scholarship – not so unlike, in fact, the bold speculations of the pirate publishers. And the spider-thread bridges of connection it throws out are also, as Theosophy's would be at the end of the century, a kind of imaginative response to the wider challenges of globalisation that worldwide publishing represents. It is noteworthy, for example, that Rivett-Carnac and Quiller-Couch are both committed to a

migratory understanding of human development. Similarly, it is striking that a supposed encounter with ‘an Arab refugee’ gave W.B. Yeats the thought that, in turn, gave me the working title for this essay. The unnamed man, who met Yeats at one of his lectures in Boston ‘a little before the War’, spoke to him about Arabic editions of Oscar Wilde and the popularity of *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* (1888). Indeed, various works by Wilde were published at Cairo and Beirut in the early part of the century, but what stayed with Yeats – if we can credit the anecdote – was his interlocutor’s perception of the reception of Victorian orientalist fairytales into oriental languages as a process of *re-translation*:⁵³

‘They are our own literature’, he said. I had already heard that ‘The Soul of Man under Socialism’ was much read in the young China party; and for long after I found myself meditating upon *the strange destiny of certain books*.⁵⁴

Though the examples I have given may be considered eccentric or unrepresentative, it is their very peculiarity that offers us a route forward – inasmuch as a truly global history of the book needs to attend to the global dimensions of readers’ imaginations. ‘[T]hat which is given has to be received’, Iser reminds us, ‘and the way in which it is received depends as much on the reader as on the text’.⁵⁵ The way in which the readers who have featured in this essay receive the gifts of circumstance is governed by an ability, indeed a tendency, sharpened through isolation, to make connections and find resonances across the breadth of the literary map. Quiller-Couch’s idealism, Kipling’s ambition, Rivett-Carnac’s bibliophile archaeology, and perhaps most of all Yeats’s anecdote are founded on different brands of fallacy. Nonetheless, the prejudices, anxieties and leaps of faith that make up the costume-box of their active moral imaginations, can still indicate to us the need to apply a transnational understanding of history, and of the history of ideas, to the study of odd volumes.

Notes

¹ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness: an authoritative text; backgrounds and sources; criticism*, ed. Robert Kimbrough (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006), pp. 37–8.

² Mark D. Larabee, ‘Joseph Conrad and the Maritime Tradition’, in *A Historical Guide to Joseph Conrad*, ed. John G. Peters (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 70.

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- ³ John Anselm Griffiths, *Observations on some points of seamanship; with practical hints on naval œconomy, &c.* (Portsmouth: W. Harrison, 1824).
- ⁴ Steamboats were in fact widespread in the 1820s, though Griffiths makes little reference to them.
- ⁵ For the figuration of the colony as ‘anachronistic space’, see Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Context* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), p. 40.
- ⁶ Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, p. 38.
- ⁷ William Hazlitt, *Selected Essays*, ed. John Sampson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958), p. 61.
- ⁸ Hugh Clifford, *A Free-lance of To-day* (London: Richards Press, 1897), p. 111.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 112.
- ¹⁰ Hugh Clifford, ‘Alone’, in *Bush-whacking: and other stories* (Edinburgh and London: Blackwood, 1901), p. 277.
- ¹¹ Victoria Glendinning, *Leonard Woolf: a Biography* (New York: Free Press, 2006), p. 70. Swanton’s 1939 *Wisden* is on display in the museum at Lord’s Cricket Ground.
- ¹² Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A theory of Aesthetic Response* (London and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), p.116.
- ¹³ John Barnes et al., ‘A Place in the World’, in *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain, Volume VI: 1830-1914*, ed. David McKitterick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 597.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 599–601.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 612–13.
- ¹⁶ The Foreign Reprints Act (1847) represented the earliest, failed, attempt at legislation. See Rimi B. Chatterjee, ‘Far-Flung Fiction: Colonial Libraries and the British Raj’, *Jadavpur University Essays and Studies*, 17 (2003), p. 70.
- ¹⁷ Emily Eden, *‘Up the Country’: Letters Written to her Sister from the Upper Provinces of India* (London: Richard Bentley, 1866), pp. 157–8.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 265. Emphasis Eden’s.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 265.
- ²⁰ Helen Small, ‘A Pulse of 124: Charles Dickens and a pathology of the mid-Victorian reading public’, in *The Practice and Representation of Reading*, ed. James Raven, Helen Small and Naomi Tadmor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 276.
- ²¹ Kylie Mirmohamadi and Susan K. Martin, *Colonial Dickens: what Australians made of the World’s Favourite Writer* (Melbourne: Australian Scholarly, 2012), p. 22. Of British possessions, Dickens visited only Canada (once) and Ireland. See Grace Moore, *Dickens and Empire* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), pp. 1, 12.
- ²² Indeed, the colony as a whole was hungering for reading matter. Supposedly when the two Dublin booksellers, George Robertson and Samuel Mullen, arrived in Melbourne in 1852 they found customers already waiting at the wharf to buy their stock. See ‘Mullen’s: a Literary Centre’, *Argus*, 10 Sept 1921.
- ²³ James Demarr, *Adventures in Australia Fifty Years Ago* (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1893), p. 119. For more on Demarr, see Mirmohamadi and Martin, *Colonial Dickens*, p. 8.
- ²⁴ Bret Harte, *The Select Works of Bret Harte, in Prose and Poetry* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1875), p. 489.
- ²⁵ *Pioneer*, 13 June 1870. Article found in SxMs-38/1/4/1 (Lockwood Kipling’s scrapbook). Sussex University Library Special Collections, The Keep, Brighton.

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- ²⁶ The speaker is Wali Dad in 'On the City Wall' (1889), the reference being to Mr Mantalini in *Nicholas Nickleby*: "I am always turning, I am perpetually turning, like a demd old horse in a demnition mill." See Rudyard Kipling, *Stories and Poems*, ed. Daniel Karlin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 41 and Charles Dickens, *The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1839), p. 322.
- ²⁷ Iser, *Act of Reading*, p. 107.
- ²⁸ Ibid., p. 125.
- ²⁹ Ibid., p. 116.
- ³⁰ Arthur Quiller-Couch, 'The Commerce of Thought', in *Cambridge Lectures* (London: J.M. Dent, 1943), p. 113.
- ³¹ Ibid., p.113.
- ³² Ibid., p. 113.
- ³³ Jeffrey Auerbach has drawn attention to the overwhelming note of tedium sounded in colonial diaries, in 'Imperial Boredom', *Common Knowledge* 11:2 (2005), p. 284.
- ³⁴ Gauri Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India*, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), p. 54.
- ³⁵ Mary R. Cabot, 'The Vermont Period: Rudyard Kipling at Naulakha', *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920*, 29:2 (1986), p.185.
- ³⁶ *Public meeting of the American academy and the National institute of arts and letters, in Honor of William Dean Howells, President of the Academy from its Inception to the date of his Death* (New York: American Academy of Arts and Letters, 1922), p. 15.
- ³⁷ Ibid., 15.
- ³⁸ Ibid., p.15.
- ³⁹ W.D. Howells, *Venetian Life* (Leipzig: Tauchnitz, 1883), pp. 26, 29.
- ⁴⁰ For examples, see Rudyard Kipling, vol. 1 of *From Sea to Sea and other sketches* (London: Macmillan, 1900), pp. 24, 31, 35, 60, 176.
- ⁴¹ *Public meeting*, pp. 15–16.
- ⁴² Thomas Pinney (ed.), vol.1 of *The Letters of Rudyard Kipling* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1990), p.286–8.
- ⁴³ Ibid., pp. 16–17.
- ⁴⁴ 'The Asiatic Society', *Times of India*, 27 Feb 1867.
- ⁴⁵ Andrew Lycett, *Rudyard Kipling* (London: Phoenix, 1999), p. 36.
- ⁴⁶ Thomas R. Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 82, 88. For subsequent citations of George Stephens's work, see J.H. Rivett-Carnac, *Prehistoric Remains in Central India* (n.p.: Calcutta, 1879), pp. 10–13.
- ⁴⁷ Esaias Tegnér, *Frithiof's Saga, a Legend of Norway*, trans. George Stephens (Stockholm: A. Bonnier and London: Black and Armstrong, 1839), pp. 266, 284, 302.
- ⁴⁸ 'The Asiatic Society.'
- ⁴⁹ EI:2 (letter from Joseph to George Stephens, 12 Feb 1867). Huseby Archive, Linnaeus University Library, Växjö.
- ⁵⁰ EI:2 (letter from Joseph to George Stephens, 29 Jan 1868). Huseby Archive.
- ⁵¹ EI:2 (letter from Joseph to George Stephens, 29 Jan 1868). Huseby Archive.
- ⁵² Elaine Freedgood, *The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), p. 7.
- ⁵³ Matti Moosa, *The Origins of Modern Arabic Fiction* (London: Lynne Rienner, 1997), 116–19.

⁵⁴ W.B. Yeats, *Prefaces and Introductions: Uncollected Prefaces and Introductions by Yeats to Works by Other Authors and to Anthologies Edited by Yeats*, ed. William H. O'Donnell (London: Macmillan, 1988), p. 147. Italics mine.

⁵⁵ Iser, *Act of Reading*, p. 107.

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