

Strange Encounters: American Indians and Victorian Britain

The Transatlantic Indian, 1776-1930. Kate Flint. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009. 376 pp.

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<1> American Indians fascinated English audiences throughout the nineteenth century, from romanticized portrayals of the “noble savage” in poetry and painting to glimpses of visiting delegations of First Nations individuals seeking redress of grievances to “show Indians” appearing in Wild West performances. Copious scholarship on the “image” of American Indians in art and literature has too often neglected questions of reciprocity, the active participation of Indian people in defining their own history and representation. Similarly, such discussions have often situated their subjects within national borders that seem radically different when viewed from “Indian country,” where tribal allegiances, enmities, and identities pre-existed the emergence of the United States and where First Nations peoples navigated systems of colonial administration that spread throughout the globe during the first century of American independence. *The Transatlantic Indian* redresses both of these problems by looking at a dazzling array of encounters between American Indians from the U.S. and Canada, and British, Canadian, and American writers, artists, and public figures. Kate Flint examines materials as diverse as poetry, fiction, missionary reports, travel writing, performances, paintings, engravings, photographs, sculpture, and autobiography in order to unpack a broad variety of narratives concerning Native Americans that circulated through Victorian Britain. She traces what might be called, with reference to Joseph Roach and Paul Gilroy, the “Red Atlantic” of a two-way transatlantic contact zone (24-25).

<2> Alert to ironies and complexities at every turn, Flint acknowledges that, for many observers, the Indian “functioned as a byword for strangeness and otherness in Victorian England, frequently with the added connotation of violence and uncouthness” (151). Viewed from outside, Indians seemed to be “a screen onto which various narratives of national identity were projected: versions of Englishness, versions of America” (255). At the same time, Native American visitors to England were plunged into the social maelstrom of which Friedrich Engels wrote in *Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844* (1845), the heart-stoppingly unjust society exposed by Charles Dickens. American writer and artist George Catlin reported that one of the Ojibwa traveling with him addressed an audience in Birmingham with the following words: “If we were rich, like many white men in this country, the poor people we see around the streets in this cold

weather, with their little children barefooted and begging, would soon get enough to eat, and clothes to keep them warm,” and handed over £721.16s he and his colleagues had collected for relief of poor Englishmen (79). If British audiences used the occasion of an encounter with Indian people to ponder questions of savagery and civilization, perhaps so too did their visitors. Admittedly, it is difficult to find direct evidence about the thoughts and opinions of American Indians in nineteenth-century England. But this book does an excellent job of uncovering and evaluating available information. The touring Indians pictured on the book’s cover, wearing their show costumes for a ride on a streetcar in Manchester, are looking back at the camera as directly as it looks at them.

<3> Yet, for all the author’s thoughtfulness and attention to reciprocity, the question at the heart of this book remains, what did Victorian British observers learn about themselves through their encounters with these geographic and cultural Others? How did the contemplation of American Indians advance British understanding of themselves, their own empire, and the emerging international status of the United States in the years between the Declaration of Independence and the high tide of modernism? The linguistic convention that associated American Indians with natives of England’s South Asian colony reminds us that theories of racial hierarchy and essentialized racial thinking underlay the colonial enterprise all over the world. It is no accident that writers on India and South Africa invoked the American frontier and its heroes to celebrate and justify their work of conflict and conquest. General Robert Baden-Powell, a veteran of the Boer War, cited the works of James Fenimore Cooper to exemplify the values he recommended to his newly-formed enterprise, the Boy Scouts (139). Representation of the American frontier formed the model for other imperial fictions; it helped shape national identity on both sides of the Atlantic.

<4> If a very large part of the book’s purpose is an exploration of British identity through encounters with American Indians, then we would expect issues of gender to loom large, especially for a scholar who has written so eloquently of women writers and readers. Indeed, “the politics of gender” receives careful attention in this book, and the author considers both femininity and masculinity as factors in the complex world of the transatlantic contact zone. Allegorical representations of America (like the sculpture on the Albert Memorial in London analyzed at the beginning of the book) figured the continent itself as Indian, and female (1-2). But the Indian Other who haunted Victorian imaginations in penny dreadfuls and sensation novels was terrifyingly male (140-41). Frontier adventurers tested their masculinity against powerful Indian opponents; William “Buffalo Bill” Cody was admired as a powerful exemplar of the handsome and romantic Western hero come to life (235). Yet well-bred English women found it hard to keep their hands off the “manly and herculean” Indian performers who traveled with George Catlin (64). By contrast, to some travel writers, American Indians seemed distressingly to reverse gender roles, with men lazy and effeminate and women ugly and unfeminine (174-75). The cultural identity that is clarified by encounters with American Indians is deeply gendered and riddled with contradictions.

<5> Two chapters in *The Transatlantic Indian* approach gender issues in a systematic and sustained way. Chapter Four, “Sentiment and Anger: British Women Writers and Native Americans,” examines representations of Indians in works by women writers including Charlotte

Brontë, Felicia Hemens, Eliza Cook, Mary Howitt, Frances Trollope, Harriet Martineau, and George Eliot. “Women seem to have been particularly drawn to Indians as a poetic topic,” writes Flint, “both finding them a suitable object on which to expend the fashionable literary currency of sentimental compassion and . . . seeing them, in their apparent disempowerment and marginalization, as an analogue for their own condition as women” (87). As in the book’s other chapters, Flint not only provides a compelling analysis of her own, but offers a helpful compendium of current scholarship on the subject at hand. She argues that women writers moved from sentimentality to anger, expressing more than many male writers their rage at political policies that displaced, impoverished, and, potentially, destroyed the native inhabitants of the American forests.

<6> Chapter Seven, “Indians and the Politics of Gender,” begins by examining the writings of male travelers and sportsmen who reported on atrocities committed by “savage” Indians at war with American settlers even while they tested their own masculinity. Among male and female travelers in the United States and Canada, what Flint calls “assumptions of cultural and racial normativity” led to descriptions that judged Indian society “in relation to the customary standards of white British . . . culture” (175). Although some travelers, such as Anna Jameson, were prepared to look beyond stereotypical assumptions, other writers of nonfiction and fiction alike saw what they were looking for: retellings of the Pocahontas story, for example, or accounts of tragic displacement and failed cross-cultural marriage. Even bold works such as Gilbert Parker’s *Translation of a Savage* (1894) used plot to critique British racism and imperialism through a conventional politics of gender.

<7> *The Transatlantic Indian* is an important book, advancing conversations in several fields, including literature, cultural history, transatlantic studies, visual culture studies, and the study of the long nineteenth century as well as gender studies. Flint’s writers and subjects are men and women, British, American, Canadian, and Indian people of various tribes. She has cast her net widely, and provides clear and careful analysis of the wealth of material she has gathered. You will never read a poetic lament for an Indian brave, look at a portrait photograph of an Anglicized Native, or use the phrase “frontier” the same way again.