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Review of Jude Piesse, *British Settler Emigration in Print, 1832–87* (2016)

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Reviews

Jude Piesse, *British Settler Emigration in Print, 1832–87* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). 240 pp. ISBN: 9780198752967

British Settler Emigration in Print is a much appreciated addition to our understanding of the ways the dissemination of ideas and peoples intersect. Over the course of five substantive chapters, Piesse argues that the specific nature of periodicals made them particularly suitable for addressing and framing emigration debates; their mobility and disjointed publication provided a unique platform in which to blend the form and content of migration narratives. The book is structured around a series of different publication types and, at first, her chapters appear worryingly disparate. Nonetheless, this monograph is among the few I have encountered in recent years that builds steadily and explicitly chapter upon chapter; the arguments regarding short stories feeding naturally into discussions of novels, with both laying the groundwork for discussions of feminist and radical publications in the final chapters. Sadly, this also results in the first chapter feeling largely inconclusive, even grasping, despite reaching a satisfying conclusion by the conclusion of the text. For those planning on dipping into specific topics, be advised that much of Piesse's argument relies on this interconnectivity and layering of chapters.

The discussion begins with 1832 and the publication of the *Penny Magazine* and concludes in 1877 and the declaration of Queen Victoria as Empress of India, which heralded the era of high imperialism. As with all dating choices, these feel somewhat arbitrary and contestable, but do not negatively affect the main thrust of the argument. The choice to examine middle-class metropolitan periodicals, unusually but thoughtfully defined to include both London and Edinburgh, as well as specialist publications, provides the reader with a broad if not wholly

representative sampling of these printed debates. Piesse also openly acknowledges her exclusion of newspaper materials, despite the fluidity of content between literary magazines and news periodicals, owing to the digital overabundances of the latter. This choice, unlike her chronology, does affect her wider argument throughout the book. Many of her points would have been made far more concrete by reference to news periodicals, through quantitative weight if nothing else; however, the manner in which she contextualizes her close readings would have been much more difficult to distill into a cohesive argument had miscellany from other periodicals been included. Thus, although my own interest in newspapers heightened my concern at their exclusion, Piesse does use the magazine material in a way that justifies her decision.

Of particular note is Piesse's conscious and explicit engagement with digital archives. Unlike many other furtive users of these large-scale corpora, the author carefully explains her integration of these collections and where they sit alongside manual inspections. She documents the steps she took to obtain her sources, occasionally explaining keyword choices and regularly including direct links to the digital facsimiles examined. Piesse also makes particular reference to the importance of open repositories such as Trove, without which her work could not have had the international dimension it does. Sadly, while her own efforts to demystify her search parameters are laudable, her publisher has sadly let her down; the links provided throughout the work are institutionally linked, leading readers to the University of Exeter's single sign-on page rather than the source itself; fortunately, if you are at a

subscribing institution, removing the 'accountid' from the URL will take you to the relevant source. More abstractly, the author ponders the 'digital turn' and considers it to be a prime opportunity to reintegrate research into periodicals into more traditional literary studies, a goal that fundamentally shapes her research and writing methodologies.

Chapter 1 begins with the theoretical framework that underpins Piesse's wider argument: the connection between mobility and periodicity in both publishing and migration. The latter, she contends, was a process defined by fragmentary action, pauses as well as movement, both along the migratory pathway and within the various spaces the migrant experienced. Likewise, periodicals were defined by both the continuity and interruptions between individual issues, as well as their comparative mobility across different locations. Conceptually, this thematic connection is both intriguing and attractive, though perhaps not as novel as the author contends. In practice, however, her over-reliance upon disciplinary jargon obscures rather than elucidates what is otherwise an elegant theory of form and content. Her reliance upon the close reading of illustrative examples, likewise, gives a (false) impression that she is cherry-picking and warping the evidence to match her hypothesis. At points, her attempts to provide concrete and encapsulated examples of motion-laden texts appear overstretched; placing these examples in a wider quantitative context would have only strengthened her conclusions — that emigration was a staple of periodical literature is clearly evident when examined at scale. Likewise, the use of space, place, and time as theoretical constructs are not fully developed and only take on their full meaning in the following two chapters. Therefore, although her argument that periodicals attempted to provide a stabilized view of otherwise unruly or dangerous migration flows is well supported later in the monograph,

its initial impact is largely lost in this needlessly complex framework.

Where the first chapter was theoretical, the second chapter is concrete. Piesse carefully interweaves the resilient and almost archetypal Victorian construct of an English Christmas with more malleable conceptions of space, place, and time employed by periodical authors. By focusing on Englishness and English tradition within these texts, despite them being drawn from a broader range of British and imperial publications, the author convincingly argues that editors and authors used a particular variant of the Christmas tradition to support the concept of a unified Victorian domesticity and to provide a stable sense of place to a world of innumerable spaces and an irregular sense of time. This was particularly the case in discussions of Australian settlement, with its harsh contrasts of both the domestic space and the wider environment to those traditionally presented in Victorian Christmas stories. Here, serial close readings layer nicely upon each other, providing increasing weight to the chapter's overall thesis. Here, much more so than in the previous section, Piesse makes clear the active role authors and editors took in shaping the perceptions of migration and settlement. Her treatment of the literary returnee, in particular, layers beautifully with historical case studies presented by Marjory Harper and others (*Emigrant Homecomings*, 2005) and adds a new and welcome perspective on the imagined ordering of otherwise chaotic and unpredictable migrant flows.

Piesse's third chapter builds upon her second, though its content and methods are in some ways a departure from her discussion of the Christmas story. Separated into two sections, it examines the way that serialized novels took advantage of their context — physical and thematic — to frame or re-frame discussions of emigration into their own conceptions of domesticity and paternalism. The first half addresses a number of novels, most notably *The Caxons*, while the

second re-conceptualises Dickens's *Great Expectations*, making particular reference to the paratext surrounding this canonical work. The juxtaposition of these two sections is immediately clear. The first works through a number of lesser known, or less frequently critiqued, emigration and settlement narratives, and demonstrates how the periodicity of their publication allowed a sense of gradualism — of consistent, measured movement not only from one location to the another but from an unruly to stabilized society and family life. As with the Christmas stories, particular mention is made of return migrants who were repatriated to an English pastoral ideal at the conclusion of the novel. Her subsequent discussion of *Great Expectations*, meanwhile, is an explicit attempt to reintegrate periodicals into traditional literary studies. Going beyond the most obvious connections with emigration, the transportation and return of Magwitch, Piesse explores how the placement of the chapters within particular issues may have affected their reception by readers. She provides a careful catalogue of emigration, settlement, and otherwise international stories that appeared alongside the novel, drawing thematic connections between the plot of individual chapters and the shorter pieces that readers would have encountered in the same issue. Even abstract allusions, such as metaphorical references to ships and movement, are placed within this wider conceptual environment. At points, the connections between the cannon and the ephemeral appear too numerous and convenient; however, even if such connections were not made by the majority of readers — and Piesse never claims they were — they were clearly there to be made by those otherwise cognizant of ongoing emigration debates. A stronger sense of quantitative weight and regularity, of what percentage of each issue these allusions and connections represent, would again have further supported this intriguing possibility.

The second half of the book moves away from mainstream, middle-class literary traditions, focusing instead on feminist and radical publications. The fourth chapter discusses the *Eliza Cook's Journal* and its uneasy relationship with the wider middle-class narrative of controlling emigration flows. According to the editors and contributors to the magazine, movement to and settlement in imperial frontiers offered women an opportunity to redefine their role in society and to achieve a sense of female empowerment. The second half of the chapter focuses on more practically minded works and the role and example of the editor in directly promoting female emigration. These texts provide tantalizing images of the feminist response to Greg's 'Are Women Redundant?' and clearly demonstrate a counter-narrative to ideas of domesticity and paternalism promoted in the Christmas and emigration novels examined in the first half of the book. It is a shame, however, that Piesse did not engage more deeply with the historiography on the so-called 'Surplus Women' problem; a brief mention to the work of Hammerton, while relevant, does not provide the same support to her conclusions as would have the work of Lisa Chilton and Judith Worsnop. In the context of these other writings, her literary critiques are poignant and represent an important contribution to our understanding of the period, but would likely appear less convincing to those unfamiliar with this wider discourse.

Meanwhile, the final chapter on the radical press — loosely defined — is neatly organized into three main camps: those opposed to emigration and its commensurate controlling influences; those who resisted calls for imperial migration in favour of republican utopias in the United States; and those who rejected the notion of settlement entirely, focusing on the adventure and spectacle of migration to frontier and wild locales. As with her previous chapter, Piesse carefully juxtaposes the aims and responses of the radical press in the context of her

previous discussions, neatly layering her wider argument and demonstrating how reactions against the dominant narrative further evidence its importance and influence in the emigration debate. These two chapters will perhaps be the most interesting to historians of the periodical press, but are so reliant upon, and enriched by, the previous literary examinations, that readers should not be tempted to skip ahead.

Much like McGill's *Culture of Reprinting* (2003), *British Settler Emigration in Print* not only reintegrates serial publication with the literary cannon but also serves as a work of significant interdisciplinary importance. Historians of the periodical press may find some of Piesse's technical language cumbersome (though by no means unintelligible), but will be greatly rewarded for their efforts. Her engagement with paratext and her ability to cross-reference and bring together conversations across space and time is a significant achievement.

Similarly, any flaws or inconsistencies in her approach — her integration of paratext and historiography into her close readings, the documentation of her digital searches, and her honest referencing of digitized editions — are largely outweighed by the good examples such attempts provide. Indeed, my only lingering complaint is her somewhat self-conscious writing style, which seemed to needlessly obscure her otherwise sound conceptual framework. Although this presents no great barrier to those conversant in periodical studies, it is a shame that the work may be inaccessible to new entrants, particularly undergraduates, who would no doubt benefit from the arguments therein. Piesse's work should, therefore, be praised for its interdisciplinary relevance and methodological innovation, and any missteps should be viewed as challenges for others to build upon in the future.

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