

READING 1

Candice Goucher, Charles LeGuin, and Linda Walton, *In the Balance: Themes in Global History* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1998), selections from chapter 17, “The Tentacles of Empire: The New Imperialism and Nationalisms in Asia, Africa, and the Americas.”

Abstract: This essay explores the ideologies that both motivated and justified colonialism, and documents its specific cultural effects on Europeans. It begins by looking at the racial and religious justifications for empire, and moves to the ways in which the colonial experience informed European art, archaeology, and literature. Overall, it demonstrates that the colonial experience was not one felt only by colonized peoples. Instead, it was an important means by which European identities were constructed as well.

The Ideologies of Imperialism

Many ideas emerged in the nineteenth century in support of imperialism and were even driving forces behind it. Scientific and pseudoscientific knowledge had a tremendous impact on the language of imperialism and offered justification for it. One of the most influential ideologies of imperialism came in response to the evolutionary theories of Charles Darwin as adapted by Herbert Spencer, known as social Darwinism. Spencer and others used pseudoscientific ideas of racial inferiority on the basis of skin pigmentation and other physical characteristics (such as head size and shape) to justify imperialism. Accordingly, people were classified as separate “races” along an evolutionary scale, and the subjugation of peoples of color was considered the inevitable consequence of the superiority of white men. While by no means all Europeans adopted the stance of racial superiority dictated by social Darwinists, the pseudoscientific origins of racism were to have a virulent and long-lasting impact around the globe.

Christianity and the Missionary Enterprise

Though Catholic missionaries – Jesuits, Dominicans, and Franciscans – accompanied the sixteenth-century expansion of Europe and had a lasting influence in Asia and Africa, they were most successful in the Americas. In the nineteenth century, however, the Protestant missionary movement provided ideological support for the new imperialism, especially in Asia and Africa. The biblical command “Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature” was literally taken up by Protestant men and women as they moved out from their homes, cultures, and societies to make their own particular contributions to the new imperialism through evangelization, converting other peoples to Christianity.

While dedicated to converting the “heathen” unbelievers of the non-European world to the saving grace of Protestant Christianity, many missionaries engaged as well in medical work and teaching, setting up hospitals and schools as bases for their evangelical activities. The motives of missionary men and women were complex and diverse. Many European and American women simply accompanied their husbands on missions, but others went as single women for whom the mission was an attractive alternative to marriage or spinsterhood at home. The missionary life was also one of the few adventurous opportunities available to women and offered a perfect female vocation when coupled with either an intense experience of religious conversion or a steady background of religious training in family, school, and church.

Though by the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, most missionary volunteers came from the rural Midwest, the American missionary movement began in New England, coordinated by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, headquartered in Boston. In 1819 the first mission destined for the Sandwich Islands (the Hawaiian Islands) left Boston harbor on the *Thaddeus*. When the ship arrived on the big island of Hawai’i five months later, the missionaries on board ship were approached by islanders bringing articles for trade. One of the missionary wives, Sybil Bingham, was appalled by the nakedness of the men, crying out, “O, my sisters, you cannot tell how the sight of these poor degraded creatures, both literally and spiritually naked, would affect you!”

At the turn of the century, Emma and Elizabeth Martin and many other young women from the rural American Midwest, dedicated their lives to saving the world in their own generation. Aged 30 and 27, Emma and Elizabeth left their family home in Otterbein, Indiana, in the spring of 1900 for missionary work in China. Both women were college graduates, and Emma had studied medicine at Chicago Woman’s Medical College. But their education did not prepare them for the challenges of the train trip across the United States, let alone for the rigors of life in China at the turn of the century. They arrived in time to experience the Boxer Uprising.

European and American women often saw their role as one of uplifting women in foreign lands both spiritually and socially and working to improve their treatment by men, though at times missionary women found themselves in societies where women had more power than in the missionaries’ own. Both sincere and corrupt Christians, some with little education, spent much of their lives in foreign lands. Most were tolerated, and some of the European travelers became popular in their adopted cultural settings and are still remembered with affection by the communities in which they resided. One of the most famous missionaries in Africa, David Livingstone, spent decades in Southern Africa and had only one convert.

Some missionaries also recognized the great difficulties inherent in trying to accommodate Christianity to vastly different religious and cultural traditions and devoted much of their time to translation work and educating themselves in the cultures of the peoples they sought to convert. They recorded local customs and cultural traditions, including languages. For example, the British missionary James Legge, working at the China Inland Mission in the late nineteenth century, made translations of the Chinese classics that are still widely used today. Missionaries in Africa recorded languages, history, and cultural observations. Missionary accounts of the persistent slave trade in Africa figured heavily in the antislavery movement in the United States. On occasion they deliberately exaggerated and invented cultural practices attributed to African peoples in order to sway congregations back home to support missionary efforts.

The very nature of the missionary enterprise reinforced the goals of the new imperialism. Missionaries provided essential information needed for conquest. They served as critical communication links in areas remote from the colonial centers. Their mission stations were key trading points for the transfer of European manufactured goods, as well as ideas. To the missionaries, conquered peoples were “sinners to be saved.” By justifying conquest of other peoples with the purpose of converting them to Christianity, the goals of missionaries dovetailed with the political and economic goals of European and American nation states. As the American missionary and China scholar S. Wells Williams put it, the Chinese “would grant nothing unless fear stimulated their sense of justice, for they are among the most craven of peoples, cruel and selfish as heathenism can make men, so we must be backed by force, if we wish them to listen.”

The Culture of Imperialism

The expansion of imperialism in the nineteenth century was reflected in complex, often subtle, ways in the works of writers, artists, and composers. Those who colonized relied also on the processes of acculturation, the transmission of Western culture to the colonies, to create a culturally unified empire. Sometimes the cultural forces of imperialism were as effective as any military conquest.

Claiming and Constructing Cultures

When Napoleon invaded Egypt in 1798, he was accompanied by French scientists who produced a lengthy work (twenty-four volumes!) called *The Description of Egypt*. This work details the splendor of Egypt’s past as preparation for the appropriation of that past by European powers. The Franco-Prussian War (1870) led to an increase in French geographical societies, which linked geographical exploration to the imperial enterprise. Some

armchair travelers never left their own cultures but still produced imaginative renderings of life and monuments. Later in the nineteenth century, as European expeditions became more common, many travelers to Egypt and other parts of the world recorded what they saw with great accuracy.

Imagining the Past

The Italian grand opera *Aida* by Giuseppe Verdi was commissioned by the Khedive (the hereditary title granted to Egyptian rulers by the Ottomans) of Egypt to celebrate the opening of the Suez Canal and was first performed in Cairo in 1871. Set in ancient Egypt as imagined by Verdi, *Aida* tells the story of the Ethiopian princess Aida and her tragic love for Radames, the Egyptian warrior. Aida innocently betrays her lover, who is condemned to death for treason, and in the final act both Aida and Radames die entombed together. The historical background of the story is the conflict between Egypt and Ethiopia, but the contemporary setting was that of Anglo-Egyptian rivalry in East Africa during the mid-nineteenth century.

Aida represented an imagined Egyptian past reconstructed by Europeans and ironically commissioned for the opening of the strategically important Suez Canal, the control of which would continue to be contested between Europeans and Egyptians over the next century. The Suez Canal was a vital link in the economic web of imperialism, providing for the rapid and efficient transportation of goods and people between Europe and its African and Asian colonies. The city of Cairo itself mirrored European cultural and political presence juxtaposed with the Egyptian past. The east quarter of the city was still a native preindustrial city, where itinerant water peddlers controlled the water supply and the homes were plunged into darkness at nightfall. The western part of Cairo, the colonial city, was home to Europeans; the water supply came from a network of conduits connected with a steam-pumping station near the river, and the streets were illuminated with gaslights at night. The opera house where *Aida* was staged was built by the Khedive; it faced the colonial city and was part of the imported landscape.

Collecting Cultures

The mapping and description of the world was a responsibility of colonial governments, which employed scientists, linguists, and other scholars to carry out the tasks of recording, collecting, and preserving knowledge and artifacts. Archaeology and anthropology flourished in the context of nineteenth-century imperialist ventures. Recovering the artifacts of antiquity was an undertaking financed by imperialism and carried out by European archaeologists, who employed “native” guides and workers, but who gained fame and wealth for themselves from the artifacts they unearthed. Through their observations and study of other peoples and cultures, European anthropologists heightened the popular awareness of cultural differences and

often presented other cultures as museum pieces, unchanging and passive, in contrast to the dynamism of European culture.

Those who collected knowledge and artifacts were both trained specialists and ordinary travelers, including both men and women, some of whom found conventional life in Europe so stultifying that they fled its restrictions and expectations for the freedoms of colonial territories. Others acted as officials of governments or institutions, as did the Hungarian Emil Torday (1875–1931), who left Europe for the Belgian Congo in 1900, employed first by the Belgians and later by the British Museum. He eventually learned local languages and came to adopt an informed understanding of the African peoples (including the Kuba) he befriended and admired. As Torday later wrote, “I had not the slightest desire to see Europe again, and if it had been possible I would have stayed on for the rest of my life.” Emile Torday collected nearly 3,000 objects and established standards of ethnographic research techniques using oral interviews, a strong historical framework, and extensive field documentation. The collections of arts from Africa and Pacific Oceania made by Torday and others found their way from British, German, French, and Belgian territories to the museums of London, Paris, Berlin, and Brussels.

The Literature of Imperialism

In eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe, the development of the novel accompanied the emergence of nationalism, and imperialism is likewise woven into the fabric of literary works like a glittering gold thread illuminating sources of wealth that supported the aristocratic social life portrayed in the works of such authors as Jane Austen (1775–1817), the Brontë sisters, Charlotte (1816–1855) and Emily (1818–1848), and even Charles Dickens (1812–1870). The household economy of Thomas Bertram portrayed in Austen’s *Mansfield Park* (1814) depends on plantations on the distant Caribbean island of Antigua, and this consciousness intrudes ever so subtly into the novel. Acknowledgment of economic dependence produces a kind of cultural, and even racial, repugnance, juxtaposing orderly, white European society with the dark, chaotic forces of foreign places and peoples.

In Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, Mr. Rochester’s wife, the mad Bertha Mason, has a Jamaican mother who was said to be insane. In Jamaica to make his fortune, the young Rochester innocently married Bertha Mason there, and after returning to England was tormented by her until her own suicide, which also resulted in the maiming and blinding of Rochester. Emily Brontë’s great novel, *Wuthering Heights*, features the wild and passionate character Heathcliff who is said to have had a black father. Heathcliff was found by the father of the heroine, Catherine Earnshaw, in Liverpool, a leading slave-trading port in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century England. Wealth derived from the slave trade provided the income for rich families whose

homes were spread across the north of England. When the products of the slave trade or of plantation economies in the West Indies intrude on English life, they represent the forces of darkness, chaos, and tragedy.

Not only foreigners figure in the complexities of interaction between the imperial center and its colonies: Europeans who have fallen into the lower tiers of society as criminals are exiled to colonies where they can make new lives for themselves while they extend the power of empire over indigenous peoples in colonial territories. In Dickens's novel, *Great Expectations* (1861), the hero, Pip, early in his life befriends a convict, Abel Magwitch, who is transported to a penal colony in Australia. Later Pip is the recipient of wealth bestowed on him by Magwitch, but mistakenly believes his benefactor to be the mysterious and elusive aristocrat Miss Havisham. When Magwitch returns illegally to England, Pip initially rejects him because of his unsavory background (including his Australian penal exile) but finally reconciles with his surrogate father. Pip ultimately bestows on Magwitch the acknowledgment of fictive kinship, as Australia was wrapped in the protective embrace of England and the dark forces of aboriginal life there were pushed further into the interior, away from the civilized spaces of cities such as Melbourne.

The British Empire became more than a tangential factor alluded to in references to plantations in the West Indies or the backgrounds of characters in the writings of Rudyard Kipling (1865–1936). *Kim* (1901) is perhaps the quintessential novel of the empire, the story of an orphaned white boy who grows up as a native in the streets and bazaars of Lahore. At least part of *Kim* is semiautobiographical: Kipling was born in Lahore, grew up speaking Hindustani, and lived as any other native speaker until he was sent to school in England. Kim becomes involved in international espionage in India but is eventually sent away to school and returns to take up service in the British colonial government. Much of the power of *Kim* derives from the young man's interaction with an old Tibetan monk who is searching for the river that will cleanse him of sins. Kim becomes the monk's disciple and returns to him at the end of the novel, when both discover what they have been seeking: the monk, his river; and Kim, his destiny. The most poignant and remarkable feature of *Kim* is the sympathetic treatment of Indian culture that still does not contradict the legitimacy of British imperial power. Kim's (and Kipling's) view of India is a deeply ambivalent one: each finds something precious there, but the view remains one of the colonial power benevolently patronizing the peoples it conquers.

Another European writer whose work is grounded in imperialism is the Polish-born English writer, Joseph Conrad (1857–1924), the author of *Heart of Darkness* (1898–1899). As a young man, Conrad spent his life at sea, and the settings of his novels derive from his experiences in the South Seas, Central Africa, and Asia. Conrad was deeply ambivalent about imperialism and

extremely adept at portraying the dark side of European exploitation of colonial lands and peoples and the attitudes imperialism fostered among both exploiter and exploited. In *Heart of Darkness* Conrad exposed the dark underpinnings of the imperialist venture in characters whose souls are blighted by their experiences. He probably based his characters on the actions and beliefs of real persons in the Congo. In *Nostramo* (1904) Conrad showed the economic exploitation of a fictional independent Central American republic, dominated by foreign interests because of a rich silver mine. The intertwining of economic and cultural imperialism in Conrad's eyes provides a rich source of literary complexity that universalizes his characters' dilemmas to the heart of modern humanity.

By the early twentieth century, deep ambivalence characterized modern European writers who confronted the dehumanization of imperialism but were themselves caught in its web. For indigenous peoples in colonized territories, the ambivalences were different, but just as troubling, in their confrontation with the world constructed by European expansion in the nineteenth century. The adoption of European culture and institutions – Westernization – was at once a means of empowerment, enabling former colonies to assert their independence, and a source of profound anxiety about their own cultural identity. At the same time the dynamic interaction between European and non-European peoples and cultures produced a rich confluence of cultures reflected in musical forms, art, literature, and aspects of material life such as food and clothing. Similarly, the tension between European and non-European cultural forms has its counterpart in the tensions between tradition and modernity that shaped music, art, and especially literature in the twentieth century.

Imperialism knit the world together as an extension of Europe, but Europe's exposure to other peoples and cultures also contributed in important ways to the reconstruction of European identity in the twentieth century. As the world has become technologically interconnected, the emerging global culture has been constantly and rapidly transformed, producing increasingly unstable, fragmented, and ambiguous cultural and social identities, but also bearing the imprint of a rich sense of possibility produced by the dynamic interaction of cultures.