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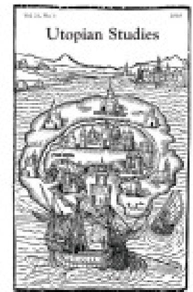
Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction (review)

Eóin Flannery



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to identify the people referred to by Wells and others. While Partington's identification of some 450 figures (many of whom are quite obscure) reflects a great deal of painstaking research, the reader may not discover it, which would be a shame given its depth and utility. On the other hand, collecting the biographies together in one place allows the reader to use the "Short Biographies" as one of several "valuable resources in their own right," which seems to have been Partington's intention in creating these stand-alone sections (5).

A few minor criticisms are in order, the most serious of which is that this excellent collection lacks an index, which would greatly enhance the usability of the volume. A less serious, but somewhat annoying, flaw regards the extensive range of footnotes. Partington's desire "to provide detailed editorial support" is commendable, but in my judgment, the footnotes are too inclusive (5). Alongside (one might say engulfing) the valuable, substantive footnotes are those that define such words as *universe, dictator, chariot*, and a whole host of other ordinary terms. I imagine that the readership for this work will be more advanced than to need such terms explained. As it is, the overwhelming number of unnecessary footnotes clutter the pages and hamper readability to some extent. Finally, the material would have benefited from another proofreading or two. While there are not an inordinate number of typographical errors, there are enough to notice, especially of the type that result from too much reliance on electronic spell-checking. I came across at least six instances of the misuse of *there* for *their*. These are minor quibbles, however, when weighed against the tremendous contribution Partington has made to Wells scholarship and hence to scholars across the range of the many disciplines Wells touched. Writing by and about Wells in *Nature* attests to the significance of his thought for the twentieth century and its continuing relevance for the twenty-first century and beyond.

John Rieder. *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction.* Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2008. 183 pp. Paperback, $24.95.

Reviewed by Eóin Flannery, Oxford Brookes University

Writing in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), Edward Said suggests that the realms of cultural production and imperial exercise were complicit, indeed

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interdependent, throughout the nineteenth century. In his view subspheres of Western culture, including education, literature, visual art, scientific study, and many others, provided superstructural buttresses to the exertions of imperial expansion and hegemony. And what was most insidious about these processes was the fact that "by the end of the nineteenth century, high or official culture still managed to escape scrutiny for its role in shaping the imperial dynamic and was mysteriously exempted from analysis whenever the causes, benefits, or evils of imperialism were discussed."[1] At this juncture in the evolution of postcolonial studies as an international and interdisciplinary battery of critical resources, Said's argument has been heeded, and much sterling work has been completed on the imbrications of culture and imperialism across the varieties of imperialisms that manifested from the early modern period onward. In this general sense, then, John Rieder's *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction* is not pioneering, but it is exemplary in a more specific way through its detailed, articulate, and, ultimately, convincing theses on the conjunctions between colonialism and science fiction.

Engaging with the broad topic of "colonialism," as indicated by the title, is always going to be problematic, as it subsumes whole rafts of differential histories and geographies under the sign of an apparently universal referent. Yet, to his credit, Rieder exhibits an awareness of the methodological pitfalls of simply defaulting to an undifferentiated abstraction. His survey "refers to the entire process by which European economy and culture penetrated and transformed the non-European world over the last five centuries, including exploration, extraction of resources, expropriation and settlement of land" (25). Yet, despite this generous (and self-reflexive) gesture, there is still a sense that Rieder's critical object is homogenized. Equally, why does colonialism only have to refer to the non-European world? What about the cases of Ireland? Wales? Scotland? There are many within the Celtic fringe of the British Isles who would deem themselves postcolonial or as having been colonized. Methodologically, then, a more precise attentiveness to typological issues surrounding the employment of terms such as *colonialism* and *imperialism* would certainly have tautened the overall argument. Yet this macrostructural matter does not detract from Rieder's persuasiveness as a textual critic, as he sweeps across science fiction from figures and texts that have entered the popular imagination, such as H. G. Wells and his *The War of the Worlds, The Time Machine*, and *The Island of Dr. Moreau*; to Jules Verne and his *Journey*

to the Centre of the Earth and *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*; and on to H. Rider Haggard and his explicitly "colonial" adventure stories: *She, King Solomon's Mines*, and *Allan Quatermain*.

Two of the primary strands of Rieder's case are the notions of history and civilizational progress and how exactly these philosophical notions weigh upon the discourses of colonial administration and the literary outputs of the science fiction genre. In a nutshell, it seems that both colonialism and science fiction are products of the ideology of modernization; and both are infused with a belief in, or at least a concern for the realization of, a progressive (utopian?) future. In Rieder's terms: "The way that the 'collective characters' of the ideology of progress act within science fiction is one of the most important features of the intersection of colonialism and science fiction" (30). The colonial encounter, the engagement with the "other," is not simply a spatial drama but, rather, is resolutely figured in terms of stark temporal disparities. Thus the aggregation of spatial and temporal distances further estranges the colonial other and, in Rieder's view, betrays its affinities to the generic patterns of science fiction.

The coherence of colonialism and science fiction is not confined to such philosophical matters, though; science itself becomes a fetish and an agent of colonialism's progressive agendas. The tools and idioms of scientific discovery, employed and advanced under imperial exercise, become generic features of science fiction—the languages and devices of science fiction are at once signs of racial and anthropological difference (superiority versus inferiority), as well as effective narratological devices within a fantastic literary genre. "Othering" is achieved both by the delineation of technological anachronicity and through quasi-scientific cataloging. This process of estrangement is furthered by the utilization of alien beings, again of either superior or inferior civilizational accomplishment as contemporary humanity; protagonists travel to distant lands or distant times, again with the use of futuristic technology, and the sum total is, of course, an encounter with the "other" that produces a profound estranging affect. It is here that we get some of the most engaging material in Rieder's book; his treatment of the relationship between colonialism and science fiction is not confined to an inventory of facile analogies but highlights the fact that science fiction also provided explicit and immanent critiques of the excesses or delusions of colonialism as a political and cultural phenomenon.

In *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction*, Rieder has productively brought two critical fields into dialogue through theoretically sensitive readings of many familiar fantastic fictions. Equally he situates these authors and texts within the material and intellectual contexts of their creation, thereby historicizing the relationship between imperial expansion and the birth pangs of science fiction as a literary genre. But Rieder's analysis also stresses the dynamic relation that existed between colonialism and science fiction, in which neither was eternally subservient to the other; these discourses proved to be effective and enduring in their mutual information. This text, then, is a valuable addition to the resources of postcolonial literary studies, at once expanding its remit but at the same time pointing to the continuing limitations of a field that is always in need of supplementation.

Endnote

1. Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1993), 128.

Sherryl Vint. *Bodies of Tomorrow: Technology, Subjectivity, Science Fiction*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008. 304 pp. Cloth, £32. ISBN: 9780802090522.

Reviewed by David N. Samuelson, California State University, Long Beach

With the recent rise of biological, chemical, and cybernetic emendations to the image of what it is to be human, workers and thinkers in several fields see that image as ripe for a major overhaul. To stages known to cultural criticism as postmodern, poststructuralist, postcolonial, and late (not yet post-) capitalist, they add the possibility if not probability of the posthuman. The traditional integrity of both body and mind is under attack, in practice not just philosophical speculation, and prophets and critics predictably forecast both utopian and dystopian consequences. Since the creation of artificial life and intelligence, as well as nonhuman creatures of biological, exobiological, and synthetic origin, is perennially a province of fiction, it should be no surprise that serious science fiction writers engage them in novels and stories.

In *Bodies of Tomorrow*, Sherryl Vint examines connections among factual, speculative, and overtly fictional treatments of the posthuman as