

## Book Review

---

**Corinne Fowler, *Green Unpleasant Land, Creative Responses to Rural England's Colonial Connections*, Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 2020, paperback £19.99, pp.324**

In September 2020, the National Trust released its *Interim Report on the Connection Between Colonialism and Properties Now in the Care of the National Trust*.<sup>1</sup> Running alongside this was the Heritage Lottery and Arts Council England funded project *Colonial Countryside* (2018-2022).<sup>2</sup> A collaboration between the University of Leicester, Peepal Tree Press and the National Trust and led by Professor Corinne Fowler, the project brings together writers, historians and school children to explore the Caribbean and East India Company's connections to English country houses. *Green Unpleasant Land, Creative Responses to Rural England's Colonial Connections* is a product both of Fowler's work with the National Trust – she was Global Connections Fellow for the Trust between 2019-2020 and an editor of the interim report – and her longstanding research into rural England's colonial connections.

*Green Unpleasant Land* was published in the wake of the *Interim Report*, and both divided public opinion. In her epilogue to the book, Fowler comments on these responses, writing that, 'The British nation truly is at a crossroads. Britons can choose the path of division or else move forward in a spirit of collective discovery' (299). This text is a guidebook for that discovery. Richly detailed, comprehensively researched, emotive and evocative, the histories in this book are both at once familiar and yet revealing.

Acknowledging the extensive body of work that has come before, Fowler writes that the aim of this book is to 'provide a sound basis of evidence as a resource to inform public discussions about British colonial history' (8). The book is about recognizing the global histories present in the English landscape and the amnesia that exists around these histories. Fowler addresses this amnesia, and a nostalgia for an idyllic rural England, by asking 'have those images of a rural idyll ever been true?' (47). Throughout *Green Unpleasant Land* Fowler takes the reader on a journey through the English landscape, carefully questioning our perception of Englishness. In chapter three, she reminds us that the pheasant was introduced to Britain from Asia before the fourteenth century; in chapter five, that the name 'Thwaite' derives from Norse; and in chapter six, that many of the plants we associate with English formal gardens were introduced.

The book is divided into two parts. The first part, 'Empire, Literature and Rural England', draws on existing research and sets the book within wider public discourse around colonial histories before breaking rural England into four thematic explorations: 'pastoral', 'country house', 'moorlands', and 'plants, gardens and empire'; whilst the second part, 'Creative Responses: The Colonial Countryside', is a collection of creative literary responses by Fowler to the themes explored in the first half of the book. The creative responses appear almost cathartic for Fowler, for whom this book is not just about academic research but also a way of addressing her own family connections to transatlantic enslavement.

Fowler uses literature as a way into these histories, and the dense yet compelling third chapter on the pastoral provides this framework. Unearthing traces of Empire in pastoral poetry from the eighteenth century to the present day, she considers how the genre has developed in response to people's shifting relationships with a changing landscape, complicating ideas of place and belonging. Drawing heavily on the work of V.S. Naipaul, Fowler argues that the 'postcolonial pastoral' disrupts the role of the pastoral, which is to 'construct consoling mythologies of Englishness' (96). Throughout the book, Fowler includes examples of rural

writing by Black British and British Asian writers dispelling the idea that they have not or do not engage with the English countryside in their writing. Fowler considers how these writers play with ideas of rural belonging, using the example of Bernardine Evaristo's *The Emperor's Babe* (2001), which alludes to African-Roman centurions at Hadrian's Wall, which Fowler argues, 'undermine(s) claims to white, rural belonging which are based on the "I-was-here-first" principle' (101).

The book begins by interrogating scenes from Danny Boyle's opening ceremony at the 2012 London Olympics, analysing the scenes depicting rural England against the responses on social and printed media, all of which affirm the idea that 'the countryside is widely viewed as having everything to do with whiteness and little to do with Empire' (22). Fowler carefully weaves histories of land ownership together to demonstrate how the development of Empire and the privatization of land are interlinked. Using the example of Harewood House we learn how the land on Harewood Common was enclosed using the wealth from Barbados plantations, thereby ending the tenancies of village farmers. By exploring the depiction of the country house in poetry and prose as a symbol of English national identity, Fowler draws out the irony that many of these buildings were funded by colonial wealth. Drawing on the National Trust's *Interim Report* and Miranda Kaufmann's 2007 report for English Heritage on slavery connections to their historic sites,<sup>3</sup> Fowler also considers the contents of the country house. Mahogany furniture, Chinese porcelain, sugar bowls, Indian tea chests and paintings depicting Black servants all reveal colonial connections and the enslaved people who were brought to England to work in these houses. The book also considers the moorlands outside of these contained estates, charting the change in perception from hostile and dangerous to a place symbolizing freedom. Through writing and film Fowler links the moors' historical connections to colonial goods and cross-cultural encounters from the seventeenth century to the present day. Chapter six then considers the contributions of enslaved and indentured peoples to the introduction of plants now grown in Britain. Fowler discusses how parallels have been drawn between the movement of plants and the movement of people in the work of Black British and British Asian writers. By picking apart all aspects of the countryside: flora and fauna, place names, buildings, and the people that reside on and work the land, the book enables us to rebuild our understanding of Britain's rural tapestry through a richer cultural lens.

The breadth and relevance of this book should not be underestimated. Whilst Fowler relies heavily on an extensive body of poetry and prose to make her arguments, the wider themes of *Green Unpleasant Land* mean that this book will be of interest to students, researchers, and academics working in the fields of Literature, Cultural Studies, Postcolonial Studies, Social and Material Culture Anthropology, History, Museum Studies and Cultural Heritage. Importantly, though, it steps outside of the academy to be particularly relevant to those who work at all levels within the cultural heritage sector, those museums, galleries and historic properties currently addressing the colonial legacies of these institutions and their collections.

Alison Clark

National Museums Scotland

## Notes

- 1 Sally-Anne Huxtable, Corinne Fowler, Christo Kefalas and Emma Slocombe (eds), 'Interim Report on the Connections between Colonialism and Properties now in the Care of the National Trust, Including Links with Historic Slavery', National Trust 2020. <https://nt.global.ssl.fastly.net/documents/colonialism-and-historic-slavery-report.pdf>, accessed 11 June 2021.
- 2 See <https://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/english/creativewriting/centre/colonial-countryside-project/>, accessed 11 June 2021.
- 3 Miranda Kaufmann, 'English Heritage Properties 1600-1830 and Slavery Connections', English Heritage 2007. <https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/publications/eh-properties-1600-1830-slavery-connections/>, accessed 11 June 2021.