

The background of the book cover is a vibrant red with a glossy, wavy texture that creates a sense of movement and depth. The waves are curved and flow across the entire surface.

# Empire Writing

An Anthology of Colonial Literature 1870–1918

Edited by Elleke Boehmer

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# *Empire Writing*

*An Anthology of Colonial Literature 1870–1918*



*Edited with an Introduction and Notes by*  
**ELLEKE BOEHMER**

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## EMPIRE WRITING

THE short stories, poems, essays, travel writing, and memoirs in this anthology belong to the phase of British expansionist imperialism known as high empire (1870–1918). This was a time when an infectious excitement and conviction about world domination in ruling circles at home was beginning to be met by questioning voices from colonized territories. While statesmen, adventurers, and propagandists were envisioning and applauding imperial exploitation, we see in this book how native and settler peoples at once undercut and strangely mimicked their rhetoric and most favoured images. By gathering together writings from India, Africa, the West Indies, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Ireland, and Britain, this wide-ranging selection reveals the startling multiplicity and proliferation, the vivid contrasts and subtle shifts in responses to colonial experience, and embraces some of empire's key symbols and emblematic moments. Selected authors include Toru Dutt, Henry Lawson, Mary Kingsley, Hugh Clifford, J. E. Casely Hayford, Claude McKay, Katherine Mansfield, and Solomon Plaatje, as well as Anthony Trollope, John Ruskin, Rudyard Kipling, Flora Annie Steel, Robert Louis Stevenson, Olive Schreiner, Joseph Conrad, and Leonard Woolf.

ELLEKE BOEHMER is the author of *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature* (1995) and of two novels, *Screens Against the Sky* (1990) and *An Immaculate Figure* (1993). She has written widely on post-colonial writing and has co-edited *Altered State? Writing and South Africa* (1994). She is a lecturer in English at the University of Leeds.

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**for Thomas**

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Not long into the work on this anthology it became apparent that for anyone adequately to sift through the vast literature of the time of British Empire, even that of a circumscribed period, taking into account not only writing within Britain but also importantly literature from the ‘colonies and dependencies’, and the Indian *imperium in imperio*, would require Gargantuan capacities as well as the persistence of the tortoise. While any deficiencies in this collection are entirely my own responsibility, I am indebted to the following: for characteristically wide-ranging suggestions and advice, Shirley Chew; for breathtaking help with two sets of elusive allusions, Raymond Hargreaves and Alistair Stead; for enabling conversation about anthologies and anthologizing, Alison Donnell, David Fairer, Kate Flint, Vivien Jones, Judith Luna; for the loan of or procuring useful books and other material, Jean Cook, Anna Donald, Michael Anderson, Richard Drayton, Denis Flannery, Lynette Hunter, John McLeod, Sarah Nuttall, Nivedita Ramakrishnan; for, variously, indispensable hints, tips, notes, words, Chris Brooks, Fredrika Boehmer, Margaret Daymond, Liz Goodman, Claudia Gualtieri, Liz Gunner, Paul Hammond, Hugh Haughton, Hermione Lee, Boris Maksimov, David Mehnert, Helen Richman, Jon Stallworthy, Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, Senorina Wendoh and the unnamed OUP adviser; for generous assistance with the background to individual authors, Edmund Candler’s granddaughter, Rachael Corkill, P. J. Merrington (on Fairbridge) and Richard Sorabji. Thanks also to the staff of the Bodleian, Indian Institute, Rhodes House and Brotherton Libraries for their help on many fronts. Above all, my gratitude is to Steven Matthews for hours of library searches, sustaining conversation, patience under pressure, gleaming yet concise advice, and wonderful unfailing support. And without Thomas’s general tolerance and cheerfulness the work would have been a lot harder.

# INTRODUCTION

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The writings gathered together in this anthology belong to the phase of British high empire, embracing the years 1870 to 1918.<sup>1</sup> They reflect colonial experiences in India, Malaya, Australia, New Zealand, the West Indies, Canada, Ireland, Britain, and different regions in Africa, so suggesting the scale as well as the diversity and complexity of empire at this time.

What formally distinguished the period of high (also called new or forward) imperialism was, in particular, a more officially expansionist, assertive, and self-conscious approach to empire than had been expressed before. Under pressure of competition from other European nations, Britain was extending its colonial responsibilities, taking over more territory, and formalizing spheres of influence, especially in South East Asia, Africa, and the South Pacific. In jingoist effusions, this expansion was embodied in images of the British reveille or military waking-signal resounding continuously round the globe and of the Union Jack flying across the continents: this was the empire on which the sun never set. In fact, however, the geopolitical make-up of the British Empire at its height was a great deal more uneven and higgledy-piggledy than these images of continuity and worldwide spread allowed. In 1897, the year of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee, the empire embraced not only the white self-governing colonies and British India, an empire in itself, but also Crown Colonies ruled from Britain like the West Indian islands; protectorates and protected states as in Egypt, Uganda, or Malaya, where indigenous rulers were made to co-operate with the Foreign Office or British Residents; and chartered territories like Rhodesia. It was in response to this picture of an apparently ramshackle empire that, in certain colonialist circles, federation was suggested as a way of welding the white colonies more firmly together. This interest in consolidation, too, characterized formal imperialism.

The beginning of the period of high empire is signalled by two significant events, the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, which dramatically shortened communication links between Britain, India, and the Antipodes, and Benjamin Disraeli's 1872 Crystal Palace speech in which, by admonishing Britons to recognize and live up to their imperial responsibilities, he laid the groundwork for his time as pro-imperial Prime Minister. Within only a few years, as expansionist and defensive campaigns were being waged or were about

to be waged in Afghanistan, Malaya, Egypt, and southern and West Africa, Victoria was proclaimed Empress of India (1877), a powerfully symbolic move which was designed to consolidate further the British Raj and prevent for all time rebellions of the kind traumatically witnessed there in 1857–8, or in Jamaica in 1865. However, within only a couple of decades, a mere fourteen years after the European carve-up of Africa at the Berlin Conference of 1885, and in the immediate aftermath of the triumphalist celebration of empire that was Victoria's Diamond Jubilee, British imperialist self-congratulation was severely jolted by the setbacks of the South African War in December 1899. Around the same time, Australian Federation (1901) had inspired a vociferous republican movement in that country, and the years following witnessed uprisings and resistance movements in both Natal and Bengal.

The course even of apparently unassailable formal empire never ran completely smoothly. It was not until the cataclysmic events of the First World War (1914–18), however, that serious questions were asked in Britain about the benefits and the propriety of ruling other people 'for their own good'. Up until that time, as we see marked in various large Edwardian colonial conferences, and in the magnificent Delhi Durbar of 1911, it was fairly confidently assumed that if Britain held the imperial upper hand, all was right with the world.

A muddle of confused interactions, or a model of global control? The stentorian voice of authority, or the hubbub of a colonial trading depot? The 'banner of England' fluttering defiantly on the topmost ramparts of the besieged Residency in Tennyson's 'The Defence of Lucknow', or the Indian sepoy rebels tunnelling under the fortifications in the same poem, threatening to undermine the entire edifice? Which of these might be taken as the representative sign of British Empire in the competitive, expansive years covered by this anthology? In what, according to the multiple texts it promiscuously produced, did empire consist?

For G. O. Trevelyan, whose 1864 comments on India appear as the Foreword to this anthology, English imperial conquest, its 'march of mind' across the 'boundless Eastern plains', is symbolized in the Indian railway, in its two 'thin strips of iron' branching across the subcontinent, its mighty viaducts and ubiquitous refreshment rooms imported, it seems, straight out of the English countryside. Of course, Trevelyan concedes, this could seem a rather commonplace representation. Rudyard Kipling, Flora Annie Steel, and Edmund

Candler, as we see here, were certainly soon to reinforce it.<sup>2</sup> Images of engineering and technology in general—not only the railway but also canals and dams, as in John Beames’s ‘Memoirs’, or the telegraph, as in Kipling’s ‘His Chance in Life’—bulked large in colonial writing as symbols of the advancement white men claimed to bring.

And yet, Trevelyan also observes, this colossal grid, this triumph of European civilization as he sees it, has also become a local network of commerce and interaction to which ‘Hindoo have taken most kindly’. Across the railway’s lengths hawkers and pedlars conduct their trade, and dacoits allegedly use it to put distance between themselves and the scene of their assaults. Even to the eyes of a relative outsider, English imperial values, ideals, and structures are being rapidly adapted and creatively reinterpreted in the foreign colonial context. The Englishman himself may be viewed in a new light. The ‘indefatigable, public-spirited, plain-spoken, beer-drinking, cigar-smoking, tiger-shooting collector’, the agent of imperial conquest, Trevelyan later reflects, may well from the different vantage-point, of, say, a devout Brahmin or local ‘Maharaja’, be perceived as a ‘somewhat objectionable demon of ‘debased’ habits.

This perception of the multiplicity and instability of meanings which existed at the very heart of the colonial project, informs the whole of this anthology of empire writing. We cannot, of course, deny that the word ‘empire’ continues for obvious reasons to carry a heavy freight of jingoist, Social Darwinist, and racist connotation. The literature of empire, readers might therefore understandably assume, must be largely preoccupied with ideas of European superiority and the ‘enlightenment’ of natives once seen as consequent upon that superiority. Yet it is often forgotten that millions of people, both colonized and colonizing, who were identified with or unconcerned about colonization, formed part of the British Empire, in the sense of responding to it, having to deal with it, and in many millions of cases surviving through it. Such vast differences of position had important implications also for writing. Even among convinced English imperialists there was no homogeneous or unquestioned approach to colonization. In her descriptions of the West African ‘Fetish’ which deeply interested her, the woman traveller Mary Kingsley, for example, warned her English readers that their ‘superior culture-instincts’ had to be put aside when approaching African cultures. And Hugh Clifford, the ‘pacifier’ of hinterland Malaya and several times colonial governor across the empire, expressed a sincere regard for the Malay people he also believed to be unregenerate and in need of civilizing. The ‘grinding’ of ‘the heel of the white man’ brought ‘Trade, and

Money ... and Sanitation, and Drains, and a thousand other blessings', he wrote, yet he saw that grinding as at the same time a highly destructive process, undermining customs and breaking people's spirits.<sup>3</sup> If these writers expressed their uncertainties, how much more dubious about empire would be a West African intellectual such as J. E. Casely Hayford, highly educated within the British colonial system, but denied representation as an African, as his *Ethiopia Unbound* shows? Whether the texts which are gathered together here are read chronologically in the order in which they appear, or in the clusters formed by the reading pathways suggested at the end of each text (or, in some cases, each group of texts), and by the intertextual links drawn in the Explanatory Notes, together they trace out a matrix of values and experiences that is both broad and contrastive. The British Empire formed what was probably the most globally extensive system of oppositions the world has seen, but it was also seething with different yet intersecting lives and doings.

Having underlined this vast variety, it should immediately be added that the remit of the anthology was in fact a wide representativeness—to juxtapose within the relatively short and arguably distinct time of high empire well-established and less well-known writers working in English on both sides of the often too-embedded colonial divide. As the Note on the Anthology also points out, the aim was to bring together not only metropolitan colonialists, but settler colonials, colonial natives, and peripatetic colonial administrators and teachers; not only the pro- and anti-imperial, but also those in-between, relatively indifferent to the ideas and aims of empire but, during imperial times, nonetheless affected by and responding to them. Difference, therefore, was a governing principle of selection.

On the same basis I have made a concerted attempt to cover different geographical spaces and definitive historical moments (moves towards imperial federation; the Boer War; the emergence of settler and native nationalisms, including Irish anti-colonialism<sup>4</sup>). Texts were chosen that could be seen as symptomatic or emblematic of key areas of colonial perception and imagining. These included assumptions of supremacy and hierarchy captured in images of work, 'improvement', and 'progress'; visual bafflement at 'impenetrable' and apparently featureless foreign landscapes; stories and poems of encounter, conflict, and connection; and also preoccupations with cultural difference, dislocation, and 'taint', as well as with the inventive hybridization of languages and social habits emerging out of contact with other cultures. Texts were also drawn from different discursive and cultural contexts—demonstrating the extent to which imperial rule 'elaborated' and 'consolidated' itself in a

variety of kinds of writing.<sup>5</sup> The range extends from G. A. Henty's *Indian Mutiny* story, 'A Pipe of Mystery', in the *Boy's Own* style so central to imperial self-imagining; through Jubilee verse, 'pushful' colonial speeches, ethnography, and travel writing; to protest journalism and lyrics by Indian poets like Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu which are apparently only tangentially concerned with empire.

And yet even had the emphasis not been on range across several levels, and on a time when empire was at its most triumphal but also its most anxious, the extent of diversity not only across but within texts would probably still have been noteworthy. In reading through this anthology, it soon becomes clear that colonial relations were not only textually excessive, but excessive in their suggestiveness, in the sense that those relations not only generated a wealth of texts but that the texts continually tug against, contradict, and balloon beyond the definitions which they impose, and which may be imposed upon them. Colonial discourse, as Bart Moore-Gilbert writes, involved a 'process of cultural negotiation in constant conflict and evolution'.<sup>6</sup> Or, as Hugh Clifford puts it somewhat more figuratively, the transplanted white man on the Malay Peninsula lived simultaneously in a Hell, that is, Malaya as perceived through European eyes, and a Heaven, a land that was 'very dear to him'.<sup>7</sup> Not merely his experiences but his identifications were ambivalent at root. Within a different constituency of writers we might compare this ambivalence with the unstable register of indignation and ingratiating—stern biblical exhortation laid alongside sentimental phrases originating in a mission education—which is used by the black nationalist Solomon Plaatje to indict the new South African Union's racial land law. Again, 'cultural negotiation in constant conflict'. Or, to take one further example of many, there is the at-once categorical and contradictory voice of Flora Annie Steel, the Anglo-Indian novelist versed in several Indian languages, whose reliance on and interest in collaborations between Indian and European (as captured in her transcriptions of oral tales and her own short stories, as we see here), coexist with her firm instruction to memsahibs to govern their households as the Indian empire is governed. 'Make a hold': treat the Indian servant as you would a naughty child. These various dissonances dramatize the ambiguities and the sheer messiness that were involved in the experience of empire, and in the implementation of imperial authority itself.

Far from resolving neatly into the oppositional categories of self/other, black/white, therefore, colonial relations, and also the texts used to articulate them, can rather be seen to form a network of complicated transactions of meaning and knowledge, as several colonial

discourse theorists have recently pointed out.<sup>8</sup> To adapt remarks which have also been made in this regard by the historian Linda Colley, the study of imperial or colonial literature should, therefore, properly involve looking at a diversity of contacts, responses, and exchanges dispersed across the globe.<sup>9</sup> These contacts could be incongruous, improvised, botched, bizarre, and often cruel, but occasionally they were also mutually beneficial, the ruled reacting against but also interacting with the ruler. Imperial power, Anne McClintock has importantly pointed out, 'took haphazard shape from myriad encounters with alternative forms of authority, knowledge, and power'.<sup>10</sup> Whether expressed in the form of census, treaty, housekeeping manual, or *Boy's Own* story, the establishment and administration of empire everywhere ran up against and had to take account of different subjectivities and local histories, alternative culinary, religious, medical, and sexual practices, even where these were seemingly ignored.<sup>11</sup> A telling figure for the noise and movement not only surrounding but impinging on the colonial presence can be found in the 'multitudes' of brightly dressed, multilingual Africans and Arabs who form an intrinsic part of the famous Livingstone and Stanley meeting in both the accounts excerpted in the anthology. Therefore, quite contrary to the sanctioned model of dominant centre imposed upon periphery, and periphery responding to centre, which has in the past organized colonial studies, what we begin to see forming here is a world picture in which different regions and literatures conduct their own particular negotiations and accommodations of dominant meanings. In effect, to take a motto from the postcolonial writer Ben Okri's story 'Incidents at the Shrine', these regions and literatures are in so doing, forming 'centres' to themselves.<sup>12</sup>

It is admittedly the case that binary patterns offer convenient ways of thinking about the immensity of what colonialism involved. For, though the British Empire may have been an 'inexorably integrative', merging force, in the phrase of Edward Said,<sup>13</sup> yet we might also want paradoxically to agree with the following characterization of its expansive oddities given by the imperial pragmatist Benjamin Disraeli: 'No Caesar or Charlemagne ever presided over a dominion so peculiar. Its flag floats on many waters; it has provinces in every zone, they are inhabited by persons of different races, different religions, different laws, manners, customs.'<sup>14</sup> The broad organizing categories of West and East, the 'typical' African, Indian, or Imperialist, have been and are still used by colonial and postcolonial commentators in order to understand and explain the bewildering diversity of empire. The stereotyped end of the spectrum of such generalities would also include, as we find in the anthology, Trollope's



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