

***X Marks the Spot: Women Writers Map the Empire for British Children, 1790–1895.***

Megan A Norcia. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2010. 260pp.

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Like the authors about whom she writes, Megan Norcia attempts to cover a lot of ground in *X Marks the Spot*. Focusing on geographical primers (as well as the occasional more discursive travel narrative), Norcia uses her archive to investigate a number of interconnected ideas, from the importance of children's literature in both perpetuating and challenging dominant discourses of empire, to the importance of the mostly forgotten women who wrote such books throughout the long nineteenth century. *X Marks the Spot* is thus part of a now well-established tradition of literary critical archaeology, or detective work: the recovery of lost middle-brow or low-brow texts, and the analysis of their role in the constitution of culture.

Norcia situates her particular project at the nexus of several others, and convincingly establishes the ways in which she pushes their boundaries. One such boundary is the chronological: while work has been done on the relationship between children's education and imperialism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Norcia chooses to look earlier than this, beginning with the real rise in middle-class educational schema in the late eighteenth century (a move that also highlights the instigation of an imperial ethos among a fairly broad swath of the population, as opposed to focusing on elite education). In joining the conversation about mapping and empire, Norcia also incorporates the insights and arguments of feminist geographers to explore the connections between gender and geography—or, more specifically, to analyse the ways that the authors in her study were both limited and shaped by their position as women. Norcia argues that the absence of her texts from the historical record “has been a deliberate omission rather than an oversight,” and traces this omission to both a dismissal of women's didactic writing for children, and also “the professionalization of geography as a discipline that was the province of travelling men” (13). She argues mostly persuasively for the importance of these texts, and also for the role of their compositors as “translators”—rather than “transmitters”—of learned, scientific discourses about the world beyond their immediate experience.

The first two chapters of *X Marks the Spot* explore the ways that female authors utilised domestic metaphors in explaining far-off lands and peoples to their child readers. In Chapter One, “The Dysfunctional Family of Man,” Norcia establishes the ways children's geography primers engaged with contemporary debates on the polygenesis versus monogenesis origins of humankind, noting their devotion to a monogenesis “Family of Man” model that, she argues, “was in many ways a radical political” choice in that it implied the possibility of growth for those understood to be farther down the scale of development (42). Interestingly, her readings of the primers explore not only the hierarchical parent-child model of coloniser and colonised, but also lateral, or semi-lateral, sibling relationships among European nations. The writers Norcia studies, as she demonstrates, used their texts not only to assert Britain's rightful dominance over its overseas possessions, but also to establish the superiority of Britain's form of colonial governance to those of its European rivals. For example, she offers readings of several texts that describe the Dutch in Cape Colony as indolent, full of vice, and focused on “sensual gratification”—barely better than the poor souls they ruled; Britain's subsequent takeover of the colony is described as a form of liberation and enlightenment, rather than a continuance of domination (58). Chapter Two, “Place Settings at the Imperial Dinner Party,” likewise explores the primers' use of food and consumption metaphors “to display the English superiority over both European rivals and non-European subjects” (68).

Domesticity becomes, in Norcia's analysis, a proving ground both for imperialism and for her authors: in the former case, because "the way a culture satisfies its appetites reflects its moral character" (87); in the latter, because the display of their domestic knowledge establishes the women's credentials as housewives and mothers.

In Chapters Three and Four, "Terra Incognita: The Gendering of Geographical Experience" and "Prisoners in Its Spatial Matrix? Resisting Imperial Geography in Thirdspace," Norcia turns her attention somewhat more to the authors than to the texts themselves, noting that these women "ventured into fresh territory of their own" by vicariously experiencing the travel of others, and through "cultivating voices of authority" as they created and sold works drawn from sources in multiple disciplinary fields (108). Norcia examines the balancing act performed by women who simultaneously asserted their geographic professionalism and smarted under the awareness of the barriers that largely kept them from travelling in person. She posits that this tension emerges not only through authorial asides about said limitations, but also "triangulated through the voices of indigenous peoples included within the texts" — indigenous peoples who had different, and sometimes superior, ways of understanding their geography (110). Norcia thus both establishes connections between white women and indigenous Others and also argues that these texts display a quite modern understanding of the ways in which one's subject position determines the way one sees the world. In a move that initially seems counter-intuitive, she notes a connection made by her authors between their lack of real travel experience and their greater appreciation for the viewpoint of the Other: in order to maximise their authority as writers, they tend to "deprivilege the actual contact experience" and instead "endorse a type of emotional contact... characterized by intellectual communion" (151). This idea is explored most thoroughly in Chapter Four, in which she identifies "thirdspace" as "the plane on which the hegemonic imperial discourse and the alternatives voiced by non-Europeans are edited, reconstituted and displayed in primer texts by women who endorsed the imperial project yet resisted its restrictive closures" (151). Another balancing act is thus performed here, given these white Englishwomen's potentially ambivalent relationship to an imperialism that simultaneously empowers and disempowers them—an idea familiar to readers of the many works of the past several decades that have examined the roles of women in the colonial enterprise.

The strengths of *X Marks the Spot* include Norcia's introduction of a group of forgotten texts to public view; her often insightful analyses of said texts; and her clear familiarity with a broad range of critical work in postcolonial studies and cultural geography, the citing of which provides readers with a useful breadcrumb trail they can pursue to follow up on ideas of particular interest. Conversely, at times she is a little too insistent on displaying her familiarity with the field, bringing in points of postcolonial theorising somewhat distant from her narrative. Her frequent quotations from other scholars' works can be distracting and are by no means always necessary. The multipronged nature of her approach can also be a liability, as there is occasionally a tension between Norcia's desire to analyse and explore the texts she has chosen to focus on and her desire to recuperate their authors from the dustbin of history. At times, this can erupt in what feels like a forced bout of biocritical analysis, such as the moment when she suggests that a writer has bought into her own rhetoric about imperialism as a form of benevolent motherhood when deciding to raise her husband's illegitimate child (56). While possibly true, such speculations are also unknowable, and seem beyond the scope of her project.

Norcia's book had its origins in her PhD thesis, and the material for at least one chapter has appeared in print before ("The Imperial Food Chain: Eating as an Interface of Power in

Women Writers' Geography Primers." *Victorian Literature and Culture* 33 (2005): 253–68). She has also published related work on map puzzles, another way in which geographical knowledge and discourses of imperialism were imparted to children ("Puzzling Empire: Early Puzzles and Dissected Maps as Imperial Heuristics." *Children's Literature* 37 (2009): 1-32).

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