

REVIEW

NARRATIVE SETTLEMENTS

Geographies of British Women's Fiction Between The Wars

Jennifer Poulos Nesbitt

(University of Toronto Press, 2005, £28.00)

This is not a book designed for Samuel Johnson's 'common reader'. It is the work of an academic, is intended to be read by fellow academics, and is written in a language coined by the latter but opaque to others. It resembles Jane Garrity's *Step-Daughters of England* (reviewed in last year's Journal) in discussing Sylvia Townsend Warner in the context of her contemporaries, in this case Virginia Woolf, Rebecca West, Vita Sackville-West, Angela Thirkell and Winifred Holtby: the list suggests that literary discriminations are not within the author's sights (and indeed Stella Gibbons, Elizabeth Bowen, Storm Jameson, Dorothy Whipple and E.H. Young would probably have served the purpose of her argument equally well.) For as with many current works of criticism the subjects' achievements are subordinated to the critic's thesis. This author's professional expertise is apparent in the closeness of her readings; but those readings are in bondage to theory.

The premiss of her book is adumbrated in the blurb.

During the interwar period, shifting attitudes towards empire dovetailed with women's achievement of citizenship, placing women at the centre of debates about what England would be.

Responding to these cultural conditions, women writers used novels of place to analyse relationships among space, self, and nation in England, thereby establishing new ways for the country to view itself.

Whether this actually was the case where their readership was concerned is open to question; but Nesbitt is more interested in the preoccupations of her chosen writers.

I argue that particular settings are synecdoches for the 'imagined community' of the British nation, representing in miniature, the naturalization of the nation of England as a clearly 'limited and sovereign' space through the tradition of literary convention.

Such an approach may illuminate the work of naturalistic novelists like Holtby or Rebecca West, even that of the ultra-traditional and decidedly middle-brow Thirkell, on all three of whom the author can write perceptively and clearly; but *Lolly Willowes* and *Mr Fortune's Maggot* do not lend themselves to such a systematic methodology. Here the latter novel is considered alongside Winifred Holtby's *Mandoa, Mandoa!*.

The opposition between present metropole and absent periphery is a trope of postcolonial criticism, and these novels thematically explore the intolerable proximity of the two spaces through the fluidity of the male body.

Narrative Settlements lays emphasis on Warner as a lesbian writer (her long-standing affair with Percy Buck goes unmentioned); but to portray sexuality as a determining factor in *Mr Fortune's Maggot* is to ignore the peculiar delicacy of that novel's depiction of the experience of love. Its author was less interested in sexual unorthodoxy than she was in the state of being single and alone.

Although Jennifer Poulos Nesbitt's emphasis on the social and political context of these two books may be more to the point than any portrayal of them as being merely whimsical, she is foxed by the irruption of Satan at the end of *Lolly Willowes*. Not for long however: commenting on the book's conclusion she writes:

The 'hereness' still exists, both as a reality of geography and in her mind, but within the 'hegemonic discourse of masculinism', as Rose might argue, Laura has opened a 'paradoxical space' in which transformation may begin.

Point taken; but does anyone actually think like that?

Nesbitt's text is peppered with citations from books and articles by fellow academics, all of them members of the same professional coterie. We breathe the air of seminars and conference papers. The author is clearly a committed teacher and for those familiar with its linguistic usages her book should achieve its purpose and beget similar studies in its turn. The acknowledgements are as effusive and prolific as one has come to expect nowadays, and pretty well everyone receives a word of thanks except the cat.

But when toiling through the jargon-ridden obfuscation of currently fashionable academic prose it is heartening to recall John Gross's comment that although Mrs Leavis might be well worth reading on Jane Austen, he would much rather read Jane Austen on Mrs Leavis – a salutary reminder to all of us who engage in literary criticism. Admirers of Sylvia Townsend Warner are likely to have mixed feelings about her espousal by academe, and Nesbitt herself confesses that while Warner's place in scholarship may be secure, 'how thoroughly she might be integrated into course offerings is uncertain' – a remark daunting in its implications for those who read, in Johnson's phrase, 'better to enjoy life, or better to endure it.' Fortunately the art of Sylvia Townsend Warner does not lend itself to integration into anything, and remains a witness to the superior vitality of imagination and intelligence in the face of prescriptive orthodoxies of whatever kind, linguistic or otherwise.

Glen Cavaliero