Women's Colonial Gothic Writing, 1850-1930: Haunted Empire

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Melissa Edmundson's *Women's Colonial Gothic Writing, 1850-1930* strives to fill some significant lacunae in our understanding of both Gothic and colonial literature: it is the 'first extended critical study of Colonial Gothic writing by nineteenth- and early twentieth-century women who lived within the border of the British Empire during its height' (1). While much has been made of the Imperial Gothic over the years, largely from the (frequently) Orientalising perspectives of white male authors and protagonists, Edmundson rightly points out that very little has been critically explored about women's writing on the same topic – especially women who were, themselves, active participants in imperial systems.

Despite a much-needed and growing examination about women's roles in empire building (roles which were often unofficial, unpaid, and unrecorded, but crucial to the socio-economic, political, and martial hegemony of the British Empire), very little research exists that can map these roles onto the greater landscape of Gothic literature. Edmundson's ambitious text

> insists on bringing to light the darker, hidden motives and untold stories that complicate the contemporary narratives which foregrounds the ideology of British expansion as a noble quest that would improve the lives of colonized and colonizer alike [and sees] women's responses to empire as an important bridge between imperial Gothic […] and postcolonial Gothic [….] When read as a kind of middle ground between these two strains of the Gothic, women's Colonial Gothic writing becomes a kind of blending […] 'a critique of the empire from within'. (1-2)

Edmundson goes on to problematize the Colonial Gothic further by 'intentionally choosing lesser-known women writers and women whose works are typically not read as Gothic' (2), including not only more traditional fictional fare, but also several works of non-fiction, travel

writing, and autobiography, which nevertheless participate in a significant Colonial Gothic discourse.

Edmundson's introduction is possibly too short, opening up several questions about the role of Gothic literature, disparities in gendered authorship, and race – questions which are not fully resolved over the course of the text and indicate that this is only the beginning of work needed to be done on the subject. Her selection of unconventional Gothic texts and genres is highly welcome and refreshing, although her choice of authors could do with greater justification. If one critique can be made for this otherwise comprehensive and sophisticated text, it would be either the inclusion of female authors of colour, or a much stronger rationale for their exclusion from the scope of her work. Edmundson's perceptive triangulation of Gothic, gender, and colonial discourses could easily be further expanded or complicated through an investigation of Gothic female authors of colour who participated in colonial systems. This seems like an especially pertinent omission, given that Edmundson argues that Colonial Gothic female writers were, in a sense, postcolonial theorists before the formal advent of postcolonialism (9). This justification could perhaps be a moot point if greater boundaries were illuminated: Edmundson focuses on women who were 'involved' in Empire, although it is not fully clarified what 'involvement' means, at what level, or from which side of the coloniser/colonised divide.

Edmundson's otherwise convincing and thoughtful study comprises ten chapters, each looking at an individual author, arranged roughly chronologically over an eighty-year period at the height of Empire, and covering a wide swathe of geographical locations within that Empire. Her first chapter on Susanna Moodie is exceptionally strong; Edmundson tracks how Moodie's own understandings and readings of Gothic literature personally informed her fears about empire, and then reshaped themselves into her own Gothic Colonial writings – first through her biography, where she puts herself in the traditional role of Gothic heroine, and then in her fiction about the Canadian frontier, which 'constantly resists efforts to return to any state of normalcy because normalcy remains undefined and unreachable' (23). The Gothic to Moodie, Edmundson writes, 'is a way of describing what is lost or what must be reimagined in the process of emigration' (39).

Her next chapter on Isabella Valancy Crawford's Canadian short stories illustrate how the Gothic was often a space of freedom for women (48), especially when Gothic romantic clichés are undercut or subverted, as they frequently are in Crawford's works. Edmundson

dances around issues of race in her chapter on Florence Marryat's *Blood of the Vampire* (1897) and Gothic hybridity when it comes to issues of multi-ethnicity in the Caribbean. Chapter Five explores the travel writings, 'ghost stories', and religious musings of the agnostic Mary Kingsley, who 'saw spiritual matters as a way to show two separate and geographically distant cultures the possibilities and benefits of cultural understanding and mutual respect' (96). What is particularly fascinating about the chapter on Kingsley is that she serves almost as a counterpoint for the rest of the chapters: Kingsley de-Gothicises Africa and uses her reports on African superstitions and the supernatural to inform, rather than to scare, the West.

Edmundson then transitions to the African stories of Margery Lawrence and to a slightly later generation of writers. Margery, writing in the 1920s, addresses contemporary women's issues, like financial and sexual agency through a lens of imperialism. Her Modernist, interwar response to colonialism serves as an important segue in the text to the shifting roles of women, Gothic, and empire. Chapter Seven further transitions – albeit lately – to India, in which Irish writer Bithia Mary Croker 'uses ghosts and local superstitions to illustrate the nebulous relationships and the often fragile détente that existed between colonized and colonizer' (139). Here we see a type of British anxiety specific to British women, who saw the demimonde of Indian 'nautch' girls or *devadasis* enjoying certain freedoms not enjoyed by British – or other Indian – women. Her next chapter on Alice Perrin continues discourse on Indian-set Gothic texts, but shifts briefly to an Animal Studies focus: Edmundson argues that animals become increasingly central to the Colonial Gothic, used in part to blur the lines between 'colonized and uncolonized space' (169).

We return to the ghost story but move on to Australasia with Chapter Nine's exploration of Mary Fortune's Australian detective fiction. The ghosts of murdered women 'return from their graves with the distinct purpose of righting the wrongs done to them and seeking justice against those who killed them' (177). These ghosts reappropriate the gaze and bring order to the colonies by disrupting that very order they seek to crystalize. Barbara Baynton's short stories about isolation in the Australian outback further complicate the already rich and intricate dialogues Edmunson has been tracing by integrating elements of class; Baynton status as an outsider is due not only to her gender and her status as a colonial Australian, but also to being working class. The text finishes with Katherine Mansfield's Gothic work on colonial New Zealand, which is counterbalanced with her role as a Modernist:

> Amidst this land of immense space, Mansfield conveys the claustrophobic prison of one's own mind, a confinement caused by limited opportunities. In an ironic twist on the promise of property and personal freedom that appealed to so many early settlers, Mansfield suggests that this opportunity always comes at a cost. Instead of fulfilling dreams, colonial New Zealand takes more than it gives and becomes a place which turns women into uncanny doubles of themselves or, sometimes, even monsters (218).

Edmundson's book is, on the whole, a significant and enthusiastic mosaic of manifold issues, identities, anxieties, and culpabilities that go in to fashioning, maintaining, or rejecting empire. The text is increasingly convincing as it goes on and provides both academics and general readers with a valuable foothold into a woefully under-examined realm of Gothic literature.