

**Review: *The Transatlantic Indian, 1776-1930***

**By Kate Flint**

**Rohan McWilliam**

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Kate Flint

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Why did the Great Exhibition feature Peter Stephenson's sculpture of a wounded American Indian in a space highlighting United States technology and achievement? Why did the Albert Memorial feature a sculpture in which the whole of the American continent is represented by an Indian? Why was Longfellow's *Hiawatha* such a popular poem in Victorian Britain?

Kate Flint examines the iconic role of the Native American in transatlantic culture during the long nineteenth century. She argues that Indians played an important role in the way the British thought about North America and examines a myriad of transatlantic representations in a rich and interdisciplinary cultural history. Paying homage to Paul Gilroy's 'Black Atlantic', Flint traces what she coyly calls 'the Red Atlantic' in literature, sculpture, paintings, reportage, exhibitions and assorted cultures of collecting. She also recovers the voices of American Indians and the extent of their contributions to the iconography treated here. Flint is sensitive to the fact that terms like the 'Indian' or 'Native American' are constructions, which elide complex issues of identity and tribal specificity. Flint casts the occasional glance at images of South American native peoples as well and writes a great deal about Canada's role in the British imagination. British audiences were often interested in Canadian Indians as an excuse for some misguided self-congratulation over how much better Indians were treated by imperial Britain than the United States.

We should see this book as a contribution to the growing field of transatlantic studies, which is opening up new perspectives for the study of Victorianism as well as much else. Transatlantic approaches offer important comparative possibilities but also allow us into the complex national imaginary on both sides of the Atlantic. British commentators were fascinated by life and affairs in the United States (and vice versa).

American narratives and themes began to influence British popular culture in the nineteenth century (for example, Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show which is extensively discussed here). It might even prove fruitful to push twentieth-century arguments about 'Americanisation' back into the Victorian period in the light of work like this.

Flint argues that representations of Native Americans reflected contemporary concerns in Britain or were appropriated in distinctive ways. Take Robert Southey's long poem *Madoc* (1805), which recycled the myth that people from Wales had founded a colony in twelfth-century Mexico. The poem initially reflected his vision of Pantisocracy: the aspiration to create a utopian community in the New World. During the time of its composition, it came, however, to express Southey's increasing sympathy with colonialism. The figure of the Indian fulfilled other useful purposes in the nineteenth century. Native Americans achieved a dominant role in transatlantic culture because they provided a way of talking about national and ethnic origins, which suited developing ideas about race (and also racial degeneration). There was the feeling that Indians could be considered as the only truly authentic Americans (119). A reading of Thomas Campbell's poem *Gertrude of Wyoming* (1809) shows that the iconography of Indian life also provided a way of mourning the loss of a form of agrarian Englishness (50).

The major theme of Flint's book is the way in which Indians were often idealised as noble savages. However, a condition of this form of representation was that they should be viewed as part of a doomed or dying race, which would inevitably have to give way to the forces of white expansion. Indian culture thus could be an object of fascination and even sympathy at the same time as Indian people were being wiped out or forcibly relocated as in the Trail of Tears, which commenced in 1836. The recovery of Indian voices by Flint provides them with a form of agency that reveal the hollowness of the prevailing images of a dying race (even though these forms of representation could often be very sympathetic to Native American culture).

Flint argues that the images discussed here were heavily shaped by Romanticism, which generated a language of sympathy for native peoples and traded in melancholy images of dying Indians (29-30). Although Flint is at pains to uncover a large number of writers who constructed images of Native Americans, it is difficult to ignore the importance of James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826). We can tell the impact of a cultural trope in popular culture when it is absorbed into children's play.

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According to one commentator, Cooper's fiction 'divided every school playground into Mohicans and Delawares, Pawnees and Iroquois' (138). Cooper, Flint argues, helped establish 'the terms in which Indians were popularly conceived across the Atlantic' (136). This included a sense that Indians could be noble but also prone to violence as part of their culture. There were also distinctions between good Indians and bad Indians. These images then thrived in boys' fiction. Mayne Reid's novels traded on the dualism between savagery and virtue in Indian culture but also offered concern that dispossession and racism had worrying implications for the development of the British Empire (158-9). Flint also examines the way British women writers such as Frances Trollope represented native Americans, arguing that images of native American life in effect allowed them to talk about their own marginal status (87, 92). She notes the affinity of this strain of writing with women's feeling for the cause of anti-slavery.

How did the British encounter actual Native American people? Indian people were brought to the British Isles from the early seventeenth century onwards, most famously Pocahontas who came over in 1616. In the nineteenth century, there were Indian missionaries to Britain such as the Reverend Peter Jones (half-Mississauga, half Welsh) who is discussed in these pages. A number of popular shows and events drew audiences because of the participation of Indians. If the book has a central figure, it is George Catlin, the collector, artist and ethnographer, who came to Britain with a long-running exhibition about Indian life. The Indians he brought over were expected to put on a performance and act out their culture. Catlin viewed them with great sympathy but himself believed they were a doomed people. Dickens first found out about Native American culture from Catlin's show (before Indians actually joined it) and later went on to mock the Noble Savage stereotypes that it propagated (144, 150-1).

The most famous of these shows featuring American Indians was, of course, Buffalo Bill's. Its showmanship and spectacle amazed the British public in a series of visits that commenced in 1887. Flint discusses the British reception of the show arguing that Buffalo Bill was adopted by the British as a manly, colonial figure who was in effect one of them. His Wild West Show entered the national imagination so powerfully that it made sense for J.M. Barrie to introduce American Indians into Never Never Land in *Peter Pan*. British audiences imaginatively co-opted Indians into a space of pure escapism and fairyland fun, whereas American audiences saw Peter Pan's relationship with Tiger

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Lily as an allegory of the relationship between whites and Indians (254). There was, in other words, a different quality to the nature of fantasy involving Indians on either side of the Atlantic. However, these cultural encounters with Native Americans by the British were rarely frivolous; rather, they were part of a wider web of relationships and representations that forced the British to think about the frontier societies that they themselves ruled.

Flint ends her book in 1930 just at the moment that the Hollywood Western was really taking over the global imagination. I was left wondering whether she sees the representations of Indians that followed in terms of continuity or change. The Western was a vital cinematic genre until at least the 1960s. One of the forces that killed it, of course, was its problematic portrayal of Native Americans. The book did make me want to think more about how commentators in the rest of Europe represented Native Americans. Did other countries feel differently about Indians and about the West? Eugene Sue commenced his *Mysteries of Paris* in 1842 by invoking the spirit of James Fenimore Cooper, promising to explore the violent tribes that made up the Parisian underworld in the same manner. The use of Native Americans facilitated a form of description in which particular social groups could be thought of as ‘tribes’. One could find more examples.

Some of the discussion in Flint’s book will not be unfamiliar to those who have followed the scholarship on Native Americans over the years. For example, historians have long pointed to the paradox that Native American life could be idealised and romanticised at the same time as Indians were being exterminated. However, the incorporation of an Anglo-American framework by Flint takes us into new territory. The Victorians cherished stories about frontier societies (although Flint is sensitive to the ways in which the ‘frontier’ is an invented space in so many different ways). The book offers a distinctive and complex treatment of the imperial imagination in Victorian Britain, all the more effective as it includes the United States, which was no longer part of the empire. The Anglo-American world was shaped by comparable issues concerning the relationship between white settlement and native peoples, whether in the American West or in Africa. We might compare Buffalo Bill with heroes of British imperial fiction such as Rider Haggard’s Allan Quartermain (254-5).

With its feeling for the politics of gender, reading and cultures of visibility, one can detect links here to some of Flint’s earlier work but the book still feels very different. I am

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not totally convinced that the concept of the 'Red Atlantic' has legs in itself but it certainly provides a vehicle for capturing some subtle and unremarked aspects of Victorian culture. It is in any case no surprise to report that Flint's readings of her sources are always searching and nuanced. The book is also very light on jargon; it is too intellectually confident for that. This will be a major text in the burgeoning field of transatlantic studies. It offers a distinctive portrait of Victorian culture that we have not seen before.

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