

Richard Eden and Peter Martyr: Author's Response*

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It is extremely gratifying to have elicited three very different responses to my article concerning a major early modern text representing the discovery of the Americas; (1) concerned with questions of the generic categorization of the text and how it should be read (William Hamlin); (2) which deals with the contemporary politics of Marian England, Richard Eden's significance and his religious allegiance (Claire Jowitt); and (3), a consideration of the significance of the vast number of editions and texts of Peter Martyr's *Decades of the New World* (Michael Brennan). It was also rather a relief to receive an open letter from a scholar of the status of Anthony Pagden which contained the comment, "I certainly have nothing to criticize" (p. 65). Such rare moments are to be treasured. The varied nature of the three responses—two of them extremely scholarly in their own right—confirm my sense that Peter Martyr's text is certainly worthy of serious reconsideration and that it poses a multitude of questions concerning the nature of early modern European colonialism which are relevant not simply for specialists in the period, but impinge upon the wider problems of colonialism, national identity, and the relationship between the two, often discussed as if they were isolated phenomena.¹

*Reference: Andrew Hadfield, "Peter Martyr, Richard Eden and the New World: Reading, Experience, and Translation," *Connotations* 5.1 (1995/96): 1-22; William Hamlin, "On Reading Early Accounts of the New World," *Connotations* 6.1 (1996/97): 46-50; Claire Jowitt, "'Monsters and Strange Births': The Politics of Richard Eden. A Response to Andrew Hadfield," *Connotations* 6.1 (1996/97): 51-65; Anthony Pagden, "Peter Martyr and Richard Eden: A Letter," *Connotations* 6.1 (1996/97): 65-66; Michael Brennan, "The Texts of Peter Martyr's *De orbe novo decades* (1504-1628): A Response to Andrew Hadfield," *Connotations* 6.2 (1996/97): 227-45.

I have little to comment on (3), Michael Brennan's learned piece, which is a far more subtle and complex reading of the bibliographical history of Martyr's text in Europe than my essay could pretend to be. I would suggest that Brennan's observations tend to support and develop my case that the work was caught up in a web of competing discourses and functions which tended to pull in opposite directions. Brennan points out how the 1587 edition modified Richard Eden's claim that England needed to copy and become a subordinate partner in Spain's ongoing colonial expansion, Hakluyt's preface suggesting instead that England needed to rival Spain's achievements. Indeed one might push the importance of Hakluyt's comments further and read them as one aspect of his overall sense that unless England could compete with Spain in the Americas then the success of the Protestant Reformation would be in danger. If left unchallenged, the Spanish empire would become invincible through the acquisition of gold and control of shipping routes and English Protestants could suffer the fate of their counterparts in France and the Low Countries.² The problem of national identity and apparent need for colonial expansion cannot be separated.³

This brings me round to William Hamlin's interesting piece (1) which makes the criticism that, despite my appeal for a sceptical reinvestigation of early accounts of the New World, I "inadvertently fall back into an undue reliance upon models and categories which, according to my essay's own logic, we ought to regard with suspicion" [tenses and pronouns altered] (47). I think Hamlin scores a palpable hit when he points out that I do not move much beyond "the 'dirty dog' and 'noble savage' schools of thought" (47) and that I should allow for more complex combinations and variations on these two poles. However, I am troubled by his claim that we should dispense with the very notion of colonialism in an attempt to recreate the sense of "unclassifiable newness" European travellers experienced when they encountered the Americas. Hamlin's critical enterprise would appear to echo that of Stephen Greenblatt when he explored the resonances of the term "Wonder" applied to the experiences of late Medieval and Renaissance travellers.⁴ Yet in that work Greenblatt argued that a sense of wonder was split into two over the very question of colonialism; for some travellers, notably Columbus himself, the sense of wonder was one of

appropriating a whole series of new phenomena in order to expand one's possessions; for others, such as John Mandeville or Michel de Montaigne, there was a sense of awe in the presence of a different world.

My point is not that Greenblatt is necessarily right in the way he classifies the texts he analyses.⁵ Rather, the problem seems to me to be a generic and empirical one. Hamlin appears to be arguing that we ought to recognise a completely separate category for texts which confronted the novelty of the Americas and had to classify the New World. However, as Anthony Pagden has pointed out, in order to classify texts one has to appeal to a system already in use. Nothing can ever hope to escape completely from what has gone before. Early modern observers of the Americas (and commentators using their eye-witness accounts) relied upon what they already knew.⁶ Put another way, no kind of writing is ever entirely free from the generic marks of another genre, even if the author signals to the reader that one particular type of text has been produced. The ghosts of other readings will always be there as traces.⁷ Hence an infinite open-mindedness, which is what Hamlin advocates, might be a fine Utopian ideal of reading, but it does not recognise the contingencies of textual composition or critical reading. Texts are never free-floating beyond systems of interpretation.⁸

Moreover, I think it would be historically rather dangerous to get rid of the notion of the colonial text. One might legitimately object to the current ubiquity of the term and the semantic burden it appears to carry which on occasions results in vast numbers of works being read as if they only existed in terms of colonial exploitation.⁹ As I have emphasised in this response, one of the purposes of my original essay was to open out the problem of colonialism and demonstrate how the history of colonial expansion and national unification went hand-in-hand. An annoying argument one sometimes encounters, not always consciously articulated, is that colonial exploitation is the worst form of exploitation possible so that unless one describes a particular form of domination as "colonial" it is assumed that one is either excusing it or being naive in not recognising the full horror of the situation.¹⁰ Nevertheless, such problems and distractions do not negate the usefulness or truth-value of the concept.

I would argue strongly for the need to preserve our understanding of "colonialism" and the "colonial" as terms which describe the movement of people from one land to another with the goal being to dominate them culturally and economically, or, in a more limited and "pure" sense, the settlement of groups of people from one land in other lands.¹¹ A rough and ready definition lacking in precision and eloquence, to be sure, but it does enable us to preserve the phenomenon of colonialism without classifying every text which mentions another culture as "colonial" or suggesting (falsely) that colonialism was a law unto itself. I would argue that Peter Martyr's *De orbe novo decades* and Eden's translation can legitimately be defined as colonial texts in the same way that one can refer to Richard Hakluyt the younger's writings as invariably "colonial" in intent and overall design, even if not every piece he wrote or collected necessarily belongs in that category. Both were designed to promote colonial expansion into the Americas, by encouraging entrepreneurs to support such initiatives, exhort settlers to make the journey across the Atlantic, and enable those in Europe to understand the achievements of the *conquistadores*. They contain numerous ethnological observations, analyses of local flora and fauna, comments on comparative government and warfare, but, overall, their purpose can be clearly defined. Hamlin is right that not all literature representing the New World should be classified as "colonial" from the outset; however, I would argue, much of it was colonial in design, most often written by those like Martyr, Eden and Hakluyt, who never set foot in the Americas.

I have far less to write about Claire Jowitt's intriguing piece of historical scholarship. She is undoubtedly right to link the image of the monstrous birth to Mary Tudor and provides ample evidence to support this contextual link. I am not wholly convinced that Eden can be read as a subtle critic of the Marian regime (although one should not rule out the possibility, of course); the text explicitly links the "monstrous byrthes" to the Wyatt rebellion of 1554 (see Hadfield 17); the evidence Jowitt assembles to suggest other criticisms of Spanish imperialism in Eden's writings is not overwhelming; and other evidence does suggest that Eden was a loyal servant of the crown (Brennan 235). Jowitt concludes that "The similarity between Eden's and Marian exiles'

descriptions of Mary's progeny would seem to indicate that there was, at the very least, a sympathy of ideas" (61). I would be inclined to turn this on its head and suggest that Eden was countering such suggestions which, as Jowitt makes clear, were well-known and widely disseminated in the mid-1550s, attempting to nullify their effect by demonstrating that the true monstrous birth was that of rebellion rather than the failed pregnancies of the queen, or, analogously, an Anglo-Spanish empire. However, I'm quite prepared to be corrected.

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NOTES

¹Exceptions to this tendency are Terry Eagleton, Frederic Jameson and Edward W. Said, *Nationalism, Colonialism and Literature* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1990); Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993).

²See Richard Hakluyt, "Discourse of Western Planting, 1584," *The Original Writings & Correspondence of the two Richard Hakluyts*, ed. E. G. R. Taylor, 2 vols. (London: Hakluyt Society, 1935) 2: 211-326, for a development of this argument. See also William S. Maltby, *The Black Legend in England: The Development of Anti-Spanish Sentiment, 1558-1660* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1971).

³See Richard Helgerson, *Forms of Nationhood: The Elizabethan Writing of England* (Chicago: The U of Chicago P, 1992), ch. 4.

⁴Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1991).

⁵For criticism of Greenblatt's analysis (as well as praise), see my review in *Textual Practice* 7.1 (Spring 1993): 103-09.

⁶Anthony Pagden, *The Fall of Natural Man: The American Indian and the Origins of Comparative Ethnology* (Cambridge: CUP, 1982) 2.

⁷Jacques Derrida, "The Law of Genre," *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (London: Routledge, 1992) 221-52; Deborah L. Madsen, *Rereading Allegory: A Narrative Approach to Genre* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995).

⁸For further reflection on this problem see Paul De Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 1983).

⁹For a fascinating attempt to correct this problem, see James Axtell, *After Columbus: Essays in the Ethnohistory of Colonial North America* (New York: OUP, 1988).

¹⁰This assumption seems to vitiate Robert Young's otherwise excellent *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West* (London: Routledge, 1990). Young implies at times that French deconstructionist philosophers were superior to members of the Frankfurt school because their ideas were formed in opposition to the colonial Algerian War rather than the European struggle against fascism.

¹¹For a much more sophisticated discussion of this problem of terminology, see M. I. Finley, "Colonies: An Attempt at a Typology," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 26 (1976): 167-88.