

Masters of All They Surveyed: Exploration, Geography, and a British El Dorado. By D. GRAHAM BURNETT. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000. Pp. xv, 298.

Having been duped, all too often, by pre-publication hype, I confess I started to read D. Graham Burnett's *Masters of All They Surveyed* with some suspicion, for its back cover is adorned with laudatory blurbs of a singularly effusive nature. The stakes are raised even higher by Burnett himself, who in "pitching this book overboard" wonders "where it will come to rest". He expresses "great pleasure" thinking that his work "could bob back" not only in the history of science and empire but also, among other disparate constituencies, in "anthropology, art history, cultural geography, postcolonial studies, and scholarship on travel literature" (xii). Burnett for the most part lives up to the advance praise lavished on him, as well as to his own scholarly aspirations. Certainly anyone interested in the colonial experience in Latin America, specifically its manifestations in the former British Guiana, will find in Burnett's elaborate reconstructions much to command their attention.

His point of departure is a strategic epigraph culled from Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism*. "Just as none of us is outside or beyond geography, none of us is completely free from the struggle over geography," writes Said. "That struggle is complex and interesting because it is not only about soldiers and cannons but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings." Inspired by Said, Burnett states that his "main aim in researching and writing this book has been to understand the place of maps, explorers, and geographical knowledge in the history of imperialism" (3). He begins in Chapter 1 by informing the reader about recent theoretical debates, demonstrating an impressive command of pertinent literature and, nine times out of ten, a clarity of exposition not always apparent in the murky waters of postmodern discourse. In Chapter 2 he grapples with the enduring myth of a South American "El Dorado", from the *entradas* in 1595 and 1617 of Sir Walter Raleigh (Burnett's preferred spelling) onward. After establishing Raleigh as the colonial "father" (26) of the fabled realm that in 1831 became British Guiana, Burnett then examines the "geographical construction of colonial territory" (15–16) in four gripping chapters that revolve around the pivotal figure of "an energetic anglicized Prussian" (20), one Robert Herman Schomburgk.

Like his compatriot-cum-mentor Alexander von Humboldt, Schomburgk dabbled in a number of ventures before his successful charting of a tricky navigation route in the West Indies caught the eye of the Royal Geographical Society (RGS), which in 1835 offered him a commission to explore the interior of British Guiana. Schomburgk accepted and, between 1837 and 1839, conducted explorations in the headwaters of the Essequibo, Corentyne, and Berbice rivers, after which he returned to London to write up, and map, his findings. Schomburgk's labours won him, in 1840, an RGS gold medal and, subsequently, the prize catch of serving as "Her Britannic Majesty's Commissioner for Surveying and Marking out the Boundaries of British Guiana" (21), then poorly defined territorially and the subject of border disputes with Venezuela and Brazil. In the company of his brother Richard, a botanist, Schomburgk led the boundary expedition between 1841 and 1844. On returning to England after the second Guiana sojourn Schomburgk received a knighthood—his earlier naming of a spectacular water lily after Queen Victoria had already paved the way—and thereafter served Britain as a high-ranking diplomat.

Burnett deploys Schomburgk as not so much a centerpiece as a touchstone, connecting the explorer and his ways to a giddy array of ideological constructs, then and now. Fortunately for his readers, however, Burnett never loses track of Schomburgk's narrative potential, and so imbues his text throughout with the explorer's presence, personality, and perspectives. Schomburgk in his own words is a marvellous, at times

contradictory, mix of adventurer, poet, intellectual, imperial lackey, and social commentator. Far from the British being “masters of all they surveyed”, Burnett furnishes sufficient evidence to indicate that, at least as Schomburgk himself eventually concluded, the opposite was true: he and his kind were defeated by what they did not know or could not foresee, most of all the ruinous consequences of their intrusions on native peoples and land–life relations. Schomburgk early on could write (142), “Where Britain’s power is felt, Mankind will feel her blessings too.” Yet summing things up he had this to say (247): “[Has] the cause of religion [and] humanity been advanced? Alas! No.” The Crown commissioner was particularly distraught at the devastating impact of smallpox and measles on native communities, the ill-fated Amariipas among them (248): “[S]ince the arrival of the Europeans, [Guiana] has become a vast cemetery of the original races Reluctant as I am to despair, the conviction is forced upon me that the Indian race is doomed to extinction.” The more that Schomburgk’s imperfect boundaries embraced, the greater the destruction wrought by empire.

Schomburgk could be a terrific character in a film, but Burnett would have to be careful if he took on the job of writing the script. The cutting-room floor is the best place for such heady tropes as (132) “the ‘control’ that the technique exerted in its countless representational rules was self-conscious, ideational, and assimilated to post-Kantian aesthetics”. Try that one out on hard-pressed Macushi Indians in their struggle to preserve their homeland. Also problematical, indeed just plain nonsense, are fanciful musings like (145): “What stands out in the image, however, are the unmistakable forms of Aztec ziggurats that dominate the mission huts and are dominated in turn by the brooding form of Mount Duida.” This particular howler is only exacerbated by an accompanying footnote: “The stones look very much like the pyramid of Cholula, which lies in the shadow of Chimborazo.” Aztec ziggurats in British Guiana? Chimborazo, not Popocatepetl, towering over Cholula? Archaeological sites, cultures, and volcanoes emblematic of Mesoamerica are best left there, not displaced to South America, where they do not belong.

The occasional lapse aside, Burnett has woven together an engaging piece of work that the University of Chicago Press has illustrated and produced with editorial flair, making *Masters of All They Surveyed* a pleasure to read and behold. The colour reproductions from Schomburgk’s *Views in the Interior of Guiana* are a visual treat, as is the *Victoria regia*, British Guiana’s (112b) “flower of destiny”. Sad to think, though, that the throngs queuing up outside Kew Gardens in 1850 to view the specimen had no idea of what was happening to the native inhabitants in Guiana who, once numerous but now diminished, had contemplated the lily for millennia.

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Pirate Novels: Fictions of Nation Building in Spanish America. By NINA GERASSI-NAVARRO. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999. Pp. x, 251.

In the wake of a recent proliferation of books about pirates swarming the literary marketplace comes a refreshingly new approach to the subject. While most of the recent contributions attempt to tweeze fact from fiction in rehashing the history and biographies of piracy, *Pirate Novels* applies both myth and reality to the transformation of national ideals in the nascent republics of nineteenth-century Latin America. One vehicle for this social restructuring, whereby the region’s piratical past was replayed as a metaphorical arena for republicanism, was the historical novel.