

# Paradoxical Imperialism: A New Reading of Informal Empire

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Jessie Reeder. *The Forms of Informal Empire: Britain, Latin America, and Nineteenth-Century Literature*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 2020. 277 pp. ISBN 978-1-4214-3807-8

The story of the Latin American nineteenth century is, in many ways, a British one, just as the story of British capitalism is in many ways a Latin American one. After the wars of independence, the commercial links between Great Britain and the former Spanish colonies, long pursued clandestinely, grew deeper and more formalized. Though Britain had offered only unofficial support for Latin American independence, going forward, Britain would enthusiastically supply experts, investors, eager buyers for Latin American raw materials, and protection for Latin American shipping. While the opening of vast new markets alongside new governments in need of British capital presented an obvious opportunity for British capitalists, the dream of a partnership with Britain was equally seductive to creole elites. These leaders saw in Britain a source of capital, a key trading partner offering to replace Spain, and a beacon of liberalism, parliamentary government, and the rule of law; in short, a bearer of a tradition of rationalism and economic success. Beyond engaging in commercial trading, British investors financed large projects like mining concerns and railroads (some successful, others almost entirely fictitious, to the dismay of their disappointed investors), and sent a steady stream of adventurers, diplomats, and scientists to Latin America.

Such links left their mark on every aspect of culture and society, and this was especially true of literature. What is surprising about Jessie Reeder's book, *The Forms of Informal Empire*, then, is not that it exists, but that it joins so few other comparative, systematic explorations of the literary links between Britain and Latin America undertaken in the discipline of English studies. Reeder takes the idea of informal empire as her main organizing principle, arguing that while this unique practice governed Britain's relations with Latin America throughout the nineteenth century, it was essentially formulated as a paradox: in order to effectively practice informal empire, Britons had to relate to Latin Americans both as citizens of free and sovereign nations whose independence brought them into the international community as equals, and also as subject peoples whose proper place was under the yoke of British commercial domination. Mapping the operations of these contradictory beliefs and

grappling with their implications is the main work of Reeder's book, which offers a valuable contribution to scholarship on informal empire as a political and economic phenomenon and to cultural histories of British-Latin American relations more generally.

Reeder divides her book into two sections examining two master narratives of nineteenth century culture: the first, progress, the diachronic and linear view of history that became hegemonic in the wake of the enlightenment, and the second, family, both the actual and metaphorical structures of relation and filiation that governed nineteenth-century social and political relations. Reeder's aim, as she explains in her coda to the book, is to demonstrate that while accounts of informal empire from both British and Latin American studies have tended to naturalize the eventual success of the informal imperialist project, this move depends on an unexamined presentism that reads the British commercial hegemony and the subsequent neocolonialism of the second half of the twentieth century, as inevitable. Critics of informal empire have tended to ascribe to the project a totalizing power. For Reeder, the antidote to this presentism is a return to critiques of informal empire written not by its historical inheritors but by its contemporaries: viewed in this way, the concept takes on a new contingency, appearing less inevitable and shot through with inconsistencies ripe for unsettling and strategically exploiting.

Reeder's approach owes a great deal to New Formalist methods, and is particularly indebted to the work of Caroline Levine, whose 2015 book *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* posited not only literary form but also social form as available to narrativizing and discursive methods of literary critique. Echoing Levine, Reeder argues that "social arrangements have form" (23), and that her method depends on "understanding powerful institutions like the nuclear family and capitalist accumulation" as interpretable using tools of literary analysis (24). Yet, Reeder continues, "if my object of analysis is not primarily literary texts, it is also not primarily institutions. Instead, I am interested in how literature contains and deploys its own ideas about the forms of social institutions" (24). Reeder attends to the structures of economic, political, and social life as described, worked through, and critiqued by literature, a series of operations accomplished in the interplay between both social and literary forms. In this way, argues Reeder, we can see informal empire as unsettling narratives governing nineteenth century life and thought. Writers' quests to resolve these challenges were themselves generative of new narratives that existed alongside the dominant narratives Reeder identifies, however uncomfortably. Importantly, Reeder wants to move beyond a model in which critics go back into the histories of the literatures of empire either to uncover heroic challenges to oppression existing in unlikely circumstances, or hidden complicities operating in texts posited as counterhegemonic. Both approaches, argue Reeder, too-easily seek resolution in cases where a more open-ended examination is more appropriate. This is particularly true in the case of informal empire, which does not resolve easily into either simple territorial colonialism or mutually advantageous economic exchange.

Reeder offers six single-author chapters examining the work of three British writers (Anna Barbauld, Anthony Trollope, and H. Rider Haggard), two Latin American writers (Simón Bolívar and Vicente Fidel López), and one, William Henry Hudson, whose hybrid identity places him in both camps. Taken together, they range over a more than a century and represent three different countries, though the action in the works under analysis

unfolds across Latin America, from Mexico and Peru to Argentina and Uruguay. The first section focuses on questions of time, temporality, and history, arguing that the progressive view of history that dominated nineteenth century understandings of historical change could not accommodate informal empire. In the second section of the book, Reeder turns to thematic of family relations: while questions of history and progress were fundamentally diachronic, the family relation is more synchronic, a form with relatively fixed positions: the novelists that Reeder examines therefore situate Britain as either a parental or spousal figure to Latin America, with the relations of command or equality that these positions entail.

Reeder's book is at its strongest when working through the paradoxical nature of informal imperial relations, and she masterfully captures the double bind that many Latin American intellectuals confronted as they faced a choice between overt domination and the informal domination on offer from Great Britain. The book demonstrates Latin America's important role in the Victorian imaginary, both as site of progress, romance, liberation, and adventure; and as location of bad investments, shady characters, and incomprehensible cultural practices. The scope and scholarly implications of the subject matter are clear, from Bolívar's dilemma in appealing for British aid, to Trollope's distrust for charlatans promoting Mexican railroad schemes, to H. Rider Haggard's hopes for a more equal partnership based on deeper cultural ties between Britons and Argentines.

Reeder's formalist approach represents a promising direction for literary criticism, and her solid account of the historical, economic, and intellectual forces at play in the works she reads bolsters her case for literature as a site for thinking about the operations of what she calls social forms. I continue to wonder what other kinds of readings such a formalism makes possible, particularly if we take care to avoid both models of basic economic determinism and social form as mere metaphor. My supposition is that formalism as practiced by Levine, Reeder, and other in this school will move towards a more elaborated account of social forms as they interact with culture, with economics, with geography and with politics as the method finds a hearing beyond Victorian Studies, and especially if it can extend its reach beyond English departments. Reeder's book's contribution to Latin American studies may do just that.

Citing Talia Schaffer, Reeder observes that, in Victorian novels, the introduction of a new character into a family through marriage or alliance dynamizes the narrative, allowing for new possibilities and new mobilities. This an apt image for the work Reeder herself has done in *The Forms of Informal Empire*, which ought to expand the possibilities for new work in hemispheric, Victorian, and Latin American studies alike. The book makes a powerful argument that lumping informal empire in with neocolonialism does a disservice to our analyses of both. Though they are undoubtedly related across time—through durable structures of increase, accumulation, filiation, and descent—we ought to pay more attention to the writers who understood these developments as neither natural or inevitable, and who entertained the possibility of other futures. Just as important, however, is the book's commitment to sustained comparative reading of British and Latin American writers in conversation with one another: rather than reproduce colonial divides of metropolitan and peripheral literatures and harden the disciplinary boundaries that separate them, Reeder takes a common historical experience as the basis for a comparison that enriches the conversation in both literary-critical traditions.