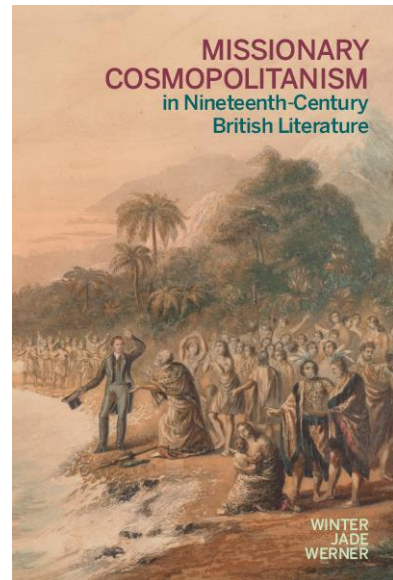


Molly Watson
reads
*Missionary Cosmopolitanism in
Nineteenth-Century British Literature*

by Winter Jade Werner¹

IN HER PREFACE TO *MISSIONARY COSMOPOLITANISM in Nineteenth-Century British Literature*, Winter Jade Werner alerts the reader to ‘intellectual histories about missionaries and their global influences that perhaps hadn’t been excavated’ (viii). Her study analyses how nineteenth-century British evangelical missionaries were influenced by Enlightenment cosmopolitan ideas. Werner’s understanding of cosmopolitanism is influenced by John Williams’ proclamation in *A Narrative of Missionary Enterprises in the South Sea Islands* (1837) that ‘The Christian is the only true cosmopolite’ (quoted in Werner 1). She understands Christian cosmopolitanism as an effort to become a ‘citizen of the world’ who observes human culture (quoted in Werner 3). In so doing she seeks to highlight the ideological contradictions of the missionary project: missionaries’ espousal of evangelical universal liberty co-existed with the denationalization of Britain’s colonial subjects. Werner identifies nineteenth-century British literature—particularly the novel—as one of the key mediums through which these tensions were explored. Using missionary periodicals as well as Charles Dickens’ *Bleak House* (1853), Robert Southey’s *A Tale of Paraguay* (1825) and *Sir Thomas More* (1829), Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847), and Sydney Owenson’s *The Missionary: An Indian Tale* (1811) and *Luxima, the Prophetess: An Indian Tale* (1859), Werner draws attention to the shift from an Enlightenment ‘universal family of mankind’ to a more pessimistic view of intercultural encounters (3).

Chapter one, ‘The Cosmopolitan Idea in Early Nineteenth-Century Missionary Societies’, charts missionaries’ adoption of cosmopolitan language from the late eighteenth to mid-nineteenth century. The first half of the chapter considers the potentially seditious associations of cosmopolitanism in the wake of the French Revolution. Those who proclaimed themselves as ‘citizens of the world’ were viewed as revolutionary sympathisers; for conservatives, ‘cosmopolites’ were nothing more than political radicals conspiring to overthrow the monarchy (47). As such ‘cosmopolites’ were accused of abandoning ‘family



¹ Winter Jade Werner, *Missionary Cosmopolitanism in Nineteenth-Century British Literature* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2020).

and nation for the sake of global revolution' (40). Such was the opinion of Edmund Burke, whose *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) conflates nation and family in its proclamation that 'we have given to our frame of polity the image of a relation in blood; binding up the constitution of our country with our dearest domestic ties'.² Suspected of forfeiting domestic and constitutional duties to their home country in favour of a Jacobin cosmopolitanism, missionaries began to stress that their notions of liberty were not aligned with revolutionary politics. So successful was this that by the time of the Great Exhibition in 1851 Prince Albert announced that 'We are celebrating a festival of the civilization of mankind, to which all quarters of the globe have contributed their productions', an endorsement of cosmopolitan feeling that would have been regarded with suspicion half a century earlier (59).

The second half of chapter one applies the ideological contexts of the 1790s and 1850s to a reading of *Bleak House*. Through an analysis of the characters of Harold Skimpole and Mrs. Jellyby, Werner illustrates the distrust with which Dickens viewed missionary cosmopolitanism. Modelled on Leigh Hunt, Harold Skimpole is a bohemian 'coffeehouse cosmopolite', while Mrs. Jellyby is a 'telescopic philanthropist' who devotes her energy to the missionary project in 'Borrioboola-Gha' (43). Nevertheless, Werner sheds light on their similarities, namely their 'cultivated indifference' towards the family unit (63). The neglected Skimpole and Jellyby children therefore represent their parents' cosmopolitan selfishness. In Werner's view, the 'cosmopolitan-philanthropic-commercial hymns of peace' denounced by Karl Marx find its way into Dickens' novel, thereby aligning its author with a Burkean politics of scepticism (60–61).

Chapter two, 'Robert Southey and the Case for Christian Colonialism', interrogates how the missionary movement became mainstream. Werner traces how missionaries embarked on a 'public relations campaign' involving public lectures, periodicals, and travelogues to restore their reputation (69). It found a staunch supporter in the Poet Laureate Robert Southey, who reviewed missionary periodicals for the *Quarterly* and *Annual* reviews. While he was attracted to the missionary movement's emphasis on 'humanist interests, social order, and fair governance in foreign places', as Werner demonstrates, there was a darker side to his endorsement (84). *A Tale of Paraguay*, based on the Jesuit Martin Dobrizhoffer's *Historia de Aponibus* (1784), recounts a missionary's plan to convert a Guaraní family, all of whom die shortly thereafter. Werner provides a fascinating insight into how Southey used the language of disease and vaccination to argue that suffering was necessary for the greater good of civilisation, even if this was at the expense of indigenous communities (94–97). In *Sir Thomas More*, Southey appropriates Immanuel Kant's 'Cosmo-Political plan'—which had advocated civil liberty—in his defence of the secularization of religious education (102–4). Throughout the chapter Werner elucidates the troubling implications of missionary cosmopolitanism, even as missionary

² Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France: An Abridgement with Supporting Texts*, ed. Brian R. Clack (Peterborough, ONT: Broadview, 2021), 67.

societies insisted that they were 'afraid of colonizing, lest it should prove in time, destructive to the liberty, or lives and property of the natives' (91).

Chapter three, 'Universal Kinship and *Jane Eyre*', argues that the marriage plots in Brontë's novel both legitimize and problematize evangelical notions of kinship. In the first half, Werner shows how missionary societies earnestly encouraged their members to marry indigenous women well into the 1820s, so that the 'benevolent' influence of Christianity could be transmitted among the community (and future generations of biracial children). Here Werner provides an intriguing link to Southey's understanding of vaccination and disease, insofar as missionary societies believed that Western modes of conduct would be disseminated to indigenous communities via 'moral contagion' (123). However, reports of missionaries 'going native' threatened to undermine racial hierarchies, and so missionary societies began to discourage marriage with indigenous persons (125–31). Werner cites the case of Thomas Lewis, who was excommunicated after marrying a Polynesian woman; the case of George Vason, who married a Tongan woman and took to wearing native dress; and the case of Johannes Van der Kemp, who wed a thirteen-year-old Malagasy girl (125–28). This provides the context for Werner's interpretation of Rochester's interracial marriage to Bertha, which is one of 'corruption and contamination', compared to his equibrious union with Jane (117). It also informs her analysis of St. John's marriage proposal to Jane. While Rochester's marriage to Bertha is racially ambiguous, St. John's proposed union with Jane is one of racial sameness (135). As such *Jane Eyre* represents a transition in evangelical thought: where once it had promoted interracial marriages between missionaries and indigenous women, it had become increasingly conservative in its policies on reproduction (136). *Missionary Cosmopolitanism* therefore implies that the changing definitions of cosmopolitanism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had a direct impact on the social contract of marriage and the family unit.

Chapter four, 'The Missionary, *Luxima*, and the Forging of a Post-"Mutiny" Cosmopolitanism', examines Sydney Owenson's 1859 revisions to *The Missionary*. Historically viewed as minor and cosmetic, Werner effectively demonstrates that Owenson's revisions reflect a drastic shift in the efficacy of a universal humanity. She locates this change after the Indian Mutiny of 1857, when Indian sepoys had rebelled against the British East India Company. Owenson's 1811 *The Missionary* uses sentimental language in its tale of a Portuguese missionary who falls in love with an Indian woman, *Luxima*. However, in the 1859 revised edition, Owenson removes numerous passages referring to *Luxima*'s emotional state, thereby presenting her as mysterious and unknowable (164–67). Such revisions, Werner points out, are symptomatic of a broader trend in post-Mutiny writing, which dwells on the irreducibility of cultural plurality (161).

The coda, 'The Afterlives of Missionary Cosmopolitanism' briefly reviews the 1910 and 2010 World Missionary Conferences. However, it would have been useful if Werner had instead discussed the period between the 1857 Mutiny and the years leading up to the First World War. For instance, an examination of authors such as Rudyard Kipling, R. M. Ballantyne, R. L. Stevenson, Joseph

Conrad, and H. Rider Haggard may have illuminated the arguments that Werner had made in the previous chapters. For example, these authors would have provided a helpful link to prior chapters on Southey and Brontë, both of which contemplate the implications of missionaries 'going native'. Patrick Brantlinger, for instance, identifies 'individual regression or going native; an invasion of civilization by the forces of barbarism or demonism; and the diminution of opportunities for adventure or heroism in the modern world' as defining themes of the Victorian 'Imperial Gothic'.³ This aligns with Werner's articulation of a post-Mutiny disillusionment, which asserted the superiority of Western civilization even as it recognised that the British Empire was under threat. Did this post-Mutiny cosmopolitanism find its way into late Victorian imperial and adventure fiction? And do the fantasies of empire envisioned in imperial and adventure fiction speak to or complicate earlier iterations of missionary cosmopolitanism? A discussion—however brief—of the later Victorian period would have bridged the gap between Owenson's 1859 *Luxima* and the 1910 World Missionary Conference.

Scholars interested in nineteenth century evangelicalism will find much to admire in Werner's study. Her readings are thoughtful and nuanced; close textual analysis is supported by a range of primary material. Although I would have personally enjoyed more detail about the later Victorian period, *Missionary Cosmopolitanism* nevertheless reveals how the cosmopolitanisms of 'then' have influenced the cosmopolitanisms of 'now', offering a fresh perspective on how missionaries engaged with cosmopolitan discourses to promote—and re-evaluate—Christian universalism.

³ Patrick Brantlinger, *Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism, 1830–1914* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 230.