

Victorians in Dislocation: Migration and Fugitive Place

JOSEPHINE MCDONAGH 

MY recent and ongoing work is on migration and literature. Population mobility, I propose, is an analytic category through which we can reconsider nineteenth-century literature and its locations, and not just through an imperial lens. In fact, if we follow migrants on their extensive, hazardous, and often unpredictable journeys, beyond the geographical boundaries of empire, we get a clearer sense of the stakes of Victorian place-making.

Here is an example. In 1825, in the long prelude to the “Victorian Anglo-world,” a group of approximately two hundred Gaelic-speaking Scottish emigrants made the long journey to South America.¹ They traveled as a group of families, and in common with many emigrants from Europe, they were part of a commercial operation, contracted by the Colombian Association for Agriculture and Other Purposes, one of many colonization companies established at this time as joint stock companies whose specific purpose was the transcontinental export of European labor to build new colonies. These emigrants were taken to a former coffee plantation in Venezuela, then a department in the young republic of Gran Colombia. But less than two years later, in 1827, approximately three-quarters of this group embarked on a second Atlantic journey—this time northward. They landed in New York and proceeded to Upper Canada, where, in August, a fellow Scot, John Galt, welcomed them to his new settlement, Guelph. Galt, a novelist well known for his Scottish regional novels, was the secretary of the Canada Land Company, whose purpose was (in Galt’s words) “to build in the wilderness an asylum for the exiles of society—a refuge for the fleers from the calamities of the old world and its systems fore-doomed.”² Galt’s hyperbolic words drew on a familiar vocabulary of early nineteenth-century migration: that the location of settlement was an empty “wilderness”; that it served as a “refuge” and an “asylum,” a

Josephine McDonagh is George M. Pullman Professor of English at the University of Chicago, where she also directs the Nicholson Center for British Studies and is an editor of the journal *Modern Philology*. Her most recent book is *Literature in a Time of Migration: British Fiction and the Movement of People, 1815–1876* (2021).

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destination for “exiles” from the “old world” in a new world that they would help to forge. Guelph flourished in the ensuing decades of what we might call “Victorian Canada,” the earlier migration histories of some of its foremost townsmen all but forgotten.

Galt’s happy idyll-ending gives us one dominant version of European settler migration in the nineteenth century. But it belies the complexities that are revealed when we look not at this presumed end but at points along the way. As a population in motion, the group was in contact with a host of strangers—the company officials, bureaucrats and diplomats, sailors, dockers, and countless inhabitants—a racial mix of Indigenous peoples, former enslaved Africans (the majority of the population in Venezuela), and random European travelers. We can think of the journey as comprising a series of contact zones that were heteroglossic (note that not even the Scots migrants spoke English), multi-racial, and contingent. These took place outside the bounds of formal empire.³ Many accounts emphasize the logic of settling as one of domination and control, seeing people either as colonists whose freedom is evident in their freedom to move; or as natives who have no such liberty, either immobilized, their customary nomadism restrained by incoming settlers, or displaced, extirpated, or forced to leave. Yet it is important to note that in this case the situation was more complex: the male adults were bound by contractual agreements that made them something like indentured laborers, and more than half of the group were under fourteen, or otherwise elderly dependents, making them unfree in a different way. They felt they were exploited by the Colombian Association, and no doubt they were; they also felt that they had been neglected by the British government; and many distrusted the local people they met and did not want to be grouped with black-skinned former slaves. The last was not always true: some sought allegiance with strangers, and there are some accounts of destitute Scots families finding refuge with Black people in Caracas and perhaps sharing a sense of their oppression.

This case intrigues me not least for its sheer messiness. It’s an example of migration that, both for its itinerary outside empire and its fugitive character, doesn’t conform to the scholarly models of settler colonization. Here I make two points, both of which reflect on method. The first touches on the perennial question of context, or how we conceptualize the relationship between literature and history. Specifically, I ask, How does this historical case of migration, which has no direct literary representation, speak to us as literary scholars? As far as I have ascertained, there is no literary text inspired by the case, not even by John

Galt, a prolific writer who was a player in its unfolding. In this sense the events seem utterly removed from the literary sphere. Yet just scratching its surface reveals how close these migrants were to a world of letters and cultural production. In addition to Galt, in this episode we also meet Robert Kerr Porter, at the time the British consul in Venezuela as well as an artist and author of works of travel about the Iberian peninsula, Russia, Sweden, Georgia, Persia, Armenia, and ancient Babylonia. While Kerr Porter failed to assist the migrants, they *were* helped by Joseph Lancaster, the radical British educationalist and proponent of the monitorial system who happened to coincide with them in Venezuela. These humble and largely nonliterate migrants were trailed by people who participated in the hurly burly of an internationally circulating print culture. Even the assistant secretary to the association, John Ross, who accompanied them on the journey, was a former *Times* journalist and parliamentary correspondent.

Is there any significance in these overlapping spheres of the global everyday and the world of printed texts? That the circulation of print is an important factor in demographic mobility in this phase is an aspect of the migratory culture I discuss in *Literature in a Time of Migration*.⁴ In this instance, I note that the commercial entities which organized the emigration of people were also involved in the export and circulation of print: textbooks for schoolchildren, illustrated books, and bilingual magazines. Yet the ligature that joins the dispersed scenes of migration with the circulation of print is, at very least, complex and multifaceted. Print mediates migratory experience both materially and imaginatively. On the few occasions when contemporaries commented on the case of these migrants, they remarked on the elements of chance and contingency that seemed to shape their experience. It was *as though it were a novel*. The becoming-dominant literary form of the century—the novel—seemed to codify an experience of contingency that is lived in the journeys of migrants.⁵ The narratives of human movement seem to enter the literary sphere not least at the level of form.

The second point has to do with a kind of localism within our current critical practice. One of the striking points made by revisionary scholars of the Victorian period today concerns the need for more site-specific inquiries into the past.⁶ As we turn our critical gaze to the dispersed sites of empire, we need to understand them in their local contexts, not just in relation to the British metropole. I totally concur: we can only understand what's going on in colonies if we engage with the specific details of encounters in site-specific, granular ways. But I refine

this by insisting that we need to think about these sites in their relation to each other. We need to understand the interconnectivity of local places within a global arena. This is partly to help us understand the micro in its relation to the macro, and the local in the context of larger histories of global capital. But it also helps us to grasp these locations of encounter in their full complexity. It shows us how borders of all kinds are under negotiation, as sites of phenomenal and epistemological intensity. The migrants' journeys present a framework and a model for the kind of inquiry that I have in mind.

When we think about Victorians and place, therefore, we should think not only about the places of settlement but those of unsettlement too. Such fugitive experiences of migration as these of my Scottish migrants, I suggest, make legible the fragility of Victorian places within their contemporary world as well as their potential for unraveling.⁷

NOTES

1. Sources for their expedition to Venezuela and onward to Canada include Vaughan, *The Guayrians at Guelph*, and Rheinheimer, *Topo*.
2. Galt, *Autobiography*, 2:154.
3. On the uses of "informal empire" as an analytical category, see Reeder, *Forms of Informal Empire*.
4. McDonagh, *Time of Migration*.
5. On chance, contingency, and risk in migrant experience, see Garcia, "A Migrant's Lotería."
6. Papers in the MLA 2022 panel, "Victorians in Relation," made this point powerfully, notably Alisha Walters on the relation between Victorian studies and Caribbean studies.
7. Legal scholar E. Tendayi Achiume's "Migration as Decolonization" is suggestive for thinking about migration as a form of undoing, which, in the context of contemporary migration to Europe, she frames as an act of decolonization.

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