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Simon Lewis
College of Charleston

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THOMAS PRINGLE RECONSIDERED

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Matthew Shum, *Improvisations of Empire: Thomas Pringle in Scotland, the Cape Colony and London, 1789-1834*. Anthem Advances in African Cultural Studies. London: Anthem Press, 2020. Pp. 252. Hardback ISBN 978-1-78527-378-0, \$125; paper, [2021], ISBN 978-1839981791, \$40.

Improvisations of Empire is the first full-length critical study of the work of the Scottish-South African poet, and London literary editor, Thomas Pringle. Matthew Shum's careful close reading of Pringle's poetry and prose presents the Scottish-born Pringle as a kind of limit case for the Romantic sensibility as it comes up against the hard realities of colonial history. For much of the past century little known in Scotland, Pringle's reputation is much higher in South Africa where he is held up in literary history as the "father of South African poetry" and in political/cultural history as one of the earliest defenders (with friend and fellow-Scot James Fairbairn) of freedom of the press and the liberal tradition in the Cape Colony. Although Pringle lived in South Africa for barely five years, he continued to write about South Africa in the final decade of his life, when he entered the London literary scene and earned a further reputation as an abolitionist by serving as Secretary of the Anti-Slavery Society.

As its subtitle indicates, Shum's book is clearly organized and divided into three distinct phases of Pringle's life: his years in Scotland, to 1820); the years in the Cape Colony, 1820-25; and the years in London, 1826-34. Shum "considers these phases intertwined and recursive" (2), however, and he does a very good job of showing how Pringle's "South African" writing was influenced by his earlier Scottish experience, and how all of his work was influenced by his awareness of the main literary trends of his day, including the pragmatic exigencies of the literary market-place.

Throughout the book, Shum mixes respectful and astute close-reading with essential contextual and biographical explication. Particularly impressive is the way he resists reducing Pringle to some sort of model postcolonial. In the opening chapter he pays close attention, for instance, to

Pringle as a Romantic writer (especially in relation to the counter-metropolitan stance of Scottish Romanticism), and to the Scottish landscape's relation to late eighteenth-century notions of the picturesque. The Scottish scenes Pringle depicted in "Autumnal Excursion," for example, resisted both picturesque and Romantic representation but were more than matched in their "barrenness" by the long vistas of the Eastern Cape. In both his native Scotland and in South Africa, therefore, Shum suggests that Pringle struggled to find an appropriate language to make the landscape legible aesthetically. In the South African case, Shum argues that what makes Pringle a foundational figure in English-language literature is the fact that he is "anti-foundational"; in showing that the landscape requires a new set of tropes, Pringle "clears the space for a set of representations not axiomatically tied to inherited aesthetic conventions" (86).

Politically speaking, the "recursive" impact of Pringle's "double expatriation" (1) is reflected in similarities between his representation of Scottish gypsies in his earliest poetry and his representation of indigenous South Africans [San] in his later work. In both case, Shum argues, Pringle opts for "figural" representation of the gypsies and San as exemplars of "wildness" rather than seeking to understand them in their own terms. Of Pringle's poetic representations of the latter group, Shum writes, "His poetry might protest the predicament of the San, yet its underlying intention is not to explore another consciousness but to persuade a reading public that they must be colonized in another way" (118).

If Pringle's Scottish background informed his understanding of his frontier experience in the Cape, his South African experience significantly influenced his work in London, and fed into his work for the Anti-Slavery Society. In turn, such close association with the abolitionist movement amplified the anticolonial themes that had already appeared in some of his South African poetry and journalism. Of the South African-related poetry and prose he produced while in London, Shum mildly calls Pringle out for "retrospectively adjust[ing]" values he had not consistently expressed or lived up to when confronted with the realities of life on the frontier. There is a stark distinction, for instance, between Pringle the anticolonial poet, whose personae in "The Song of the Wild Bushman" and "Makanna's gathering" express broadly anti-colonial views, and Pringle the settler who sought military help in fighting off San cattle-raiders and who became in his own words a kind of "petty 'border-chief'" (51). Shum resists oversimplifying the colonizer-colonized situation, however, and states that he is not drawing attention to these discrepancies in order to paint Pringle as a hypocrite but to illustrate that "even the most humane forms of colonialism entail complicities with colonial process" (57).

Both in Scotland and in South Africa, Shum sees Pringle in a similar light, as an “improving Scot” who constructed the history of his own country as an example of how the violence of the past could be mitigated and even forgotten by accepting the modernizing and civilizing influence of Britain’s colonialism: internal in Scotland and external in the Cape. Situating Pringle in this precarious position, Shum suggests that the ambivalences are not just of historical interest but are relevant today, when whiteness is under scrutiny both in South Africa and globally, and where Scottish complicity with British imperialism is balanced against the impact of English rule in Scotland. Shum’s final chapter offers a particularly thought-provoking comparison between Pringle’s avowed Adam Smithian optimism about moral improvement linked to economic improvement and an underlying Hobbesian pessimism that human beings can only be controlled by external power—a philosophical dilemma still highly relevant to contemporary South African (and indeed global) politics.

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