Worth, Aaron. **Imperial Media: Colonial Networks and Information Technology in the British Literary Imagination, 1857-1918**. Columbus: Ohio State University Press. 2014. Print. 146 pp. 49.95 USD. ISBN: 978-0-8142-1251-6.

That our "information age" has its technological, social, and political precedents (and, indeed, roots) in the Victorian age is rarely acknowledged, even as many of its media technologies—telephone, radio, movies, the QWERTY keyboard, and the phonograph—continue to play varying significant roles in it. We should therefore not be surprised that the nineteenth century is still very much with us: the popularity of Neo-Victorian fiction and steampunk culture—for example, the current Showtime series *Penny Dreadful*, and *Doctor Who*'s repeated visits to the period—attest to our unending fascination with the world of gaslight, improbably multisyllabic electronic devices, and imperial arrogance.

Yet, such twenty-first century reworkings of Victorian tropes may be owed as much to their utility as mirrors of our own contemporary technological anxieties as to their original, reflexive depictions in the mass media of the time. As Jürgen Osterhammel notes in his massive 2009 survey of the period, *The Transformation of the World*: "Today's perceptions of the nineteenth century are still strongly marked by its own self-perception. The reflexivities of the age, especially the new media world it created, continue to shape how we see it" (3).

In **Imperial Media**, American English literature scholar Aaron Worth explores this Victorian and Edwardian self-perception as reflected in their contemporary fiction (and in science fiction, itself a Victorian innovation). Worth mines the novels of such writers as Rudyard Kipling, H.G. Wells, and H. Rider Haggard to glean how their depictions of the era's rapidly-changing information and media technologies (and the content they transmitted) affirmed, reflected or satirized the British imperial project. The result is a fascinating—if occasionally recondite—examination of the often neglected intersections among technology, nationalism, colonialism and popular culture.

The "Victorian information age" has been the subject of a number of books, including Tom Standage's *The Victorian Internet: The Remarkable Story of the Telegraph and the Nineteenth Century's On-Line Pioneers* (1998), which found numerous social and cultural parallels to our own era as people on both sides of the Atlantic came to terms with the instantaneous erasure of distance, while William Gibson's and Bruce Sterling's 1991 steampunk classic *The Difference Engine* depicted an alternate Victorian history, one in which the age of mass computing came a century earlier than it did.

Worth's ambitions here are more meta: to consider how novelists at the time conceived of this nascent information age in terms of facilitating the expansion and defence of the British Empire, especially following the Indian "Sepoy Mutiny" of 1857-58.

Accordingly, it is the telegraph that casts the longest shadow, with its ocean-spanning gutta-percha-coated cables providing instant communication between England and its colonies. That the Indian insurrection centred (at least in the British imagination) on control over and destruction of the subcontinental telegraph network made the technology a favourite subject for the era's novelists. Worth finds that Kipling especially made use of telegraph-related tropes, notably the "dutiful" Indian telegraph operator anglicized by association with the technology. Queen Victoria's favourite novelist Marie Corelli also fantasized about a vast communication network, but one electronically integrated with the Christian God and motivated by the beneficent expansion of Empire.

Other media technologies energized Victorian and Edwardian authors as well: Haggard inserted proto-cinematic literary devices into his 1886 imperialist "lost world" epic *She*, while Wells parlayed different forms of transmitting media into his science fiction novels *The War of the Worlds* (the heliograph) and *The First Men in the Moon* (radio), each of which resonate with potent commentary about British imperialism. Finally, Worth finds that information itself in the form of codes permeate the early-twentieth-century thrillers of John Buchan (who would serve as Canada's Governor General from 1935 to 1940).

Such is this inseparability of media and empire that Worth detects its echoes a century later in BBC's *Doctor Who* spinoff series *Torchwood*. In its 2009 radio drama entitled "The Golden Age," an alien artifact has temporally isolated a pocket of the British Raj in a perpetual 1924, from which its residents plan (with the help of a Kipling-esque Indian) to connect the artifact to twenty-first-century cellphone networks in order to resurrect the British Empire. Worth contends that this illustrates how our own understandings of these intersections are "indebted to the narratives of the past" (116).

The erudition on display here is certainly impressive: Worth draws not only on his deep knowledge of Victorian literature but on numerous more recent works about the period, such as Standage's. However, his enthusiasm for his subject runs away with him, occasionally resulting in references made unnecessarily obscure for all but the most dedicated student of the era, or at the very least someone educated in a British public school. A little more attention to the explicative needs of the non-specialist reader throughout would have been beneficial and appreciated.

Tantalizingly, Worth closes his slim book with the recognition that these two "ideational spaces" of media and empire continue to shape our sense of geopolitical relations in the twenty-first century, but elects to leave this field for other researchers (116). **Imperial Media** is valuable for providing a greater understanding of the imaginative politics of our media and information environments, one which hopefully will inspire further explorations of their latter-day manifestations.

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