

## Review: ‘Regionalism Across the World in the Long Nineteenth Century’. Southampton Centre for Nineteenth Century Research Conference, University of Southampton, 19 – 21 September 2018.

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THE STUDY OF space and place, especially within nineteenth-century studies, has received considerable attention over the last two decades.<sup>1</sup> Regionalism, or the conception and mythology of regions, is a fundamental way in which people have situated themselves within national and global spaces, particularly as regions were being variously bounded and blurred over the course of the long nineteenth century. The Southampton Centre for Nineteenth-Century Research’s conference in September 2018 contributed to this field by presenting papers which explored the social, political, cultural and economic factors which contributed to the growth and characteristics of regionalism. The conference was interdisciplinary and international both in its range of speakers, and in the panels and regions chosen for the papers, which also crossed disciplinary and geographical boundaries. The panels were divided into travel and tourism, gender, politics, empire, regions and nations, the West Country, print networks and literature, but several prevalent themes concerning regionalism crossed the boundaries of these panels in a way which was pertinent to the theme of the conference. These themes included, but were not limited to, the regional in opposition to the central, the globality of regions, and the ways in which regional spaces and identities are constructed.

The construction of regionalism was the subject, for example, of the talk given by the keynote speaker. According to Matthew Townend, the scholarly and popular medievalist enthusiasms of many Victorians were directed towards local or regional ends.<sup>2</sup> It was hugely enlightening, therefore, that the keynote speech, given by Dr Fiona Edmonds, medieval historian and Director of the Regional Heritage Centre at Lancaster University, offered a historiography of nineteenth-century medieval scholarship. As Andrew Hinde’s conference paper, which applied a ‘long view’ approach in discussing

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<sup>1</sup> Isobel Armstrong, ‘Space as Experience and Representation in the Long Nineteenth Century’, *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 17 (2013), p.1.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew Townend, ‘Victorian Medievalisms’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Victorian Poetry*, ed. by Matthew Bevis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 170.

the regional patterns of Victorian England and Wales, also argued, Edmonds contended that we must look further back in history to understand regional formations and nineteenth-century ideas of regionalism, particularly as the Victorians themselves were so concerned with searching their medieval pasts to delineate regional identities. Her paper, 'The Myth of Regions? Nineteenth-Century Interpretations of Northern England's Medieval Past' revealed the ways in which many British regions lacked permanent boundaries, a point demonstrated by maps from several different sources and historical periods to establish how the spaces of Britain had been variously divided and regionalised according to different perspectives. She consequently argued that as regional landscapes lacked a degree of integrity and uniformity, they were dependent on nineteenth-century myth-making through interpretations of local medieval histories. The fact that so much collective effort was put into constructing and reinforcing regionalism in the nineteenth century, and that it lay at the heart of the medievalist revival movement as Townend contends, suggests that regionalism was a fundamental way in which Victorians conceived not only of national and global spaces, but also of their own selfhood within those larger arenas.

Regionalism therefore merits further consideration to fully situate its importance within Victorian studies. The papers given at this conference all contributed to this effort. It was particularly striking that many heterogenous papers in their discussions of regionalism highlighted a binary of regional purity in opposition to metropolitan corruption. For example, Katie Holdway, Angelique Richardson, Leonard Baker and Marguérite Corporaal all presented in different panels, yet each cited this binary as one of the ideas behind nineteenth-century regionalism. Regionalism in this form is in part responding to anxieties over modern industrialisation threatening historic agriculturalism, as the papers given by Holdway and Richardson suggested. Other papers which explored this binary expanded on the idea of an authentic regionalism or a conception of regions as embodying true national character. In his paper entitled 'West Country Scum: Nineteenth-century National Politics, Local Ritual and Space in the English South-West,' Baker highlighted the attitude from counties such as Somerset and Dorset towards 'foreign Tories' who were defined as such not by their geographical locations but by their actions. Baker here cited the self-conscious idea of regions as sites of moral purity in opposition to the metropole as a source of corruption. Corporaal also argued that Irish regions, especially in the west, were interpreted as sites which

expressed an authentic national character from which many Irish had become disconnected through English cultural imperialism. In this case, the imperial centre, rather than simply a metropolitan one, has a corrupting influence on national character which must necessarily be rediscovered in remote regions. In the nineteenth-century, as these two papers show, regions were politicised to various ends, including working towards nationalist purposes. This discussion more broadly illuminated the anxieties at the heart of some regionalist writings which saw the modern industrialisation of the centre as a corrupting influence on the idealised purity of remote, rural regions within the wider context of globalisation.

However, as this dichotomy sets up London, or the centre, as the opposite of the regional, it ignores the unique regionalism of the metropole itself. This is problematic in the field of Victorian Studies because many nineteenth-century novelists, such as Charles Dickens or George Gissing, were understanding and constructing the unique characteristics of the expanding region of London within other frameworks of nineteenth-century regionalism. It is refreshing, therefore, that this binary understanding of the metropolitan and the provincial was not the only method of defining regionalism across the conference papers, and that this possible reduction of regionalism was challenged, for example, by Daniel Brown's paper on 'Macaulay's New Zealander' which treated London as a region in his exploration of Victorian assumptions about its cultural geography. Angelique Richardson's paper also revealed that the dichotomy between metropolitan corruption and regional purity was not consistent across treatments of regionalism by nineteenth-century writers, through her comparative analysis of Sarah Grand and Thomas Hardy's depictions of regional spaces. Whilst Grand's regionalism lacks economic specificity and material reality in order to create a myth of pure rural England, Hardy's regionalism reveals rural spaces to be historically specific rather than naturally organic and highlights local individualism in order to challenge the nostalgic idolisation of rural spaces particularly prevalent towards the end of the nineteenth century.

Another way in which the idea of the purity of regions was challenged across the conference was to situate regions within the global and to investigate the real and ideological networks which connected regional spaces to wider spaces. In her paper on 'The New Woman in Britain and the Arab World at the fin de siècle,' Asma Char argued that freedom of movement across boundaries in the Arab World prior to the Sykes-

Picot Agreement in 1916 and the Balfour Declaration in 1917 enabled a united Arab regional identity to emerge. The regional Arab identity, Char argues, superseded other identities and allowed the New Woman movement to develop through inter-regional marriages, the periodical press and access to Western education which aided the transfer of feminist ideologies across global spaces. Char's paper also demonstrated how, in the global sphere, groups of countries can be treated as regions.

Along this strain, other papers discussed the fluidity of regional borders and the system of networks across the world in the nineteenth century which worked within and across regions. David Finkelstein, for example, explored the transglobal network of typographical trade unions, while Eleanor Shipton argued that the growth of the national postal network relied on diverse regional communities. Laura Cox's paper drew a thought-provoking comparison between Georgina Grove's challenge of the boundaries of form (such as diary entries and travel writing) and her freedom of movement across the boundaries of various spaces. One could therefore also read from Cox's paper a parallel between Grove's diary passages and her physical passages across spaces through global networks which helped to shape various regional identities.

One way in which people in the nineteenth century conceptualised and negotiated regional landscapes was to construct fictional regions. In her analysis of Thomas Hardy's *The Return of the Native* alongside Shen Congwen's *Long River*, Yuejie Liu revealed some of the ways regional spaces are constructed, for example through maps, specific local ecology, and particular myths, the latter of which was also emphasised by the keynote speech, as has been mentioned above. In another panel, Katie Holdway used Isobel Armstrong's recent model of spatial theory in her analysis of George Gissing's *Demos* to push our understanding of why regional spaces were constructed in nineteenth-century fiction. Gissing, she argued, uses regional space as a stage on which to dramatize the artificiality of class relations and explore potentialities of agency. This leads us to thinking about how regional landscapes are in turn used to construct identities. Jonathan Memel, for example, demonstrated how Florence Nightingale's historical identity is being re-read in regional terms, particularly emphasising her connection to the East Midlands. This self-conscious construction of regional identity is part of an AHRC-funded project 'Florence Nightingale Comes Home for 2020' on which Memel is currently a Research Fellow, and further emphasises the

understanding that nineteenth-century conceptions of selfhood were often understood regionally.

Regionalism, the papers at the conference argued, was therefore fundamentally a way of understanding and constructing one's place and identity within an expanding conception of global space in the nineteenth century. The interdisciplinary nature of the conference reflected the idea of regions as interdependent, and how wider national and global spaces and networks help to construct regional identities. The variety of papers, presenting multiple narratives of regionalism, demonstrated the elusiveness of the term 'region' and regionalism more broadly, by revealing that, in the nineteenth century, regions were understood in some cases as separate, secluded spaces which are 'bounded and mappable' and in others as networked, global spaces with permeable boundaries, depending on whose construction of selfhood was under discussion.<sup>3</sup>



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<sup>3</sup> Penny Fielding, 'Regionalisms', in *Late Victorian into Modern*, ed. by Laura Marcus, Michèle Mendelssohn, and Kirsten E. Shepherd-Barr (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 293.