

Book Reviews

Peñaloza, Fernanda, Wilson, Jason and Canaparo, Claudio (eds.) (2010) *Patagonia: Myths and Realities*, Peter Lang (Frankfurt), ix + 267 pp. £36.00 pbk.

For travellers, writers, politicians, scientists and, more recently, businessmen and eco-protesters, Patagonia has had an allure of mystery and incommensurability. Patagonia is 'one of the most written about regions', and one of the most dreamt about. Loved and feared, it evokes imaginaries from hell and from paradise.

*Patagonia* is a collection of eleven (including an introduction and an epilogue) essays, a selection of papers presented at a conference at the University of Manchester, UK, in 2005. In general, it is an engaging and well-organised collection. This volume gives a diverse vision of Patagonia as 'cultural signifier'. It claims not to 'constitute a history of representation of Patagonia', to present a rather interdisciplinary approach. It also aspires to deviate from a standard academic study of Patagonia.

The Introduction, by Fernanda Peñaloza, provides a helpful overview of the volume, and also of the notion of Patagonia, its literary presence and ethnographic relevance throughout history. The travel-writing tradition the region invokes – one in which the 'language of aesthetic landscape transformed the Patagonian geography into a sublime experience' – is the focus of most the essays.

Peter Hulme's 'Abject in Patagonia' analyses the concept of 'crossing the beach' and the 'island', using as a starting point the stories from the *Wager's* shipwreck. Interestingly he opposes the construction of the Patagonian landscape (the Beach) to the Caribbean and Polynesian ones that have prevailed in Western imaginaries. Captivatingly, he summarises the story of the shipwreck and its aftermath, and shows how social and epistemological hierarchies are questioned and problematised. The story of the complicated friendship between Darwin and FitzRoy, told by Patience Schell in the next essay – 'The Importance of Being Friendly' – combines well with Hulme's piece. Schell carefully studies the emergence (and fall) of the 'emotional intimacy' between the two men, with Patagonia as the background.

Fiona Mackintosh's 'Travellers' Trope', a study of Florence Dixie's *Across Patagonia* and her later children's books, provides a fine reading looking at the repetitive tropes and motifs recurrent in literature about Patagonia (penetration, pilgrimage), and emphasises the relationships between 'gender' and 'genre'. Also with a strong theoretical basis, Peñaloza's own contribution, 'The Missionary as a Translator', examines the bidirectional transformation that occurs with Thomas Bridges and his Yaghan–English dictionary. Peñaloza argues that Bridge creates the language he is reportedly trying to preserve, and how, thus, place and language are entwined.

Paul Birt's essay provides us with another complex transformation/transference by analysing narratives by the Welsh community in Patagonia, in particular their 'auto/biography'. He makes the compelling case that it should be part of the Argentinean literary canon. Jens Andermann's wonderful contribution 'Conquering Time' studies the relations between geography, military policies and national creation in the works of two renowned geographers, finally discussing the process of primitive accumulation in this context.

Jason Wilson's chapter about the silence and meaning in some travelogues, gives us a more poetic study of Patagonia. With subtlety, he analyses the 'acoustic Patagonia' and its meanings, which vary from fascination to horror. Karl Posso's reading of Bruce Chatwin's 'study' of Patagonia – in parallel to Evelyn Waugh's account of his travels in the Amazon – discusses how the romanticised visions of these places are at the same time 'extended and suspended'. There is a remarkable attempt to de-idealise Patagonia but

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such endeavour will always prove to be ironically impossible, 'pataphysical'. A similar pataphysical experience is examined by Eva-Lynn Jagoe, in her reading of César Aira's novel *La liebre*. Jagoe links Aira's views of Patagonia with Borges and Mansilla, and thus goes beyond a 'postmodern' analysis of Aira.

In the epilogue, which is less academic and brings fresh air to the volume, Cristian Aliaga talks about the Patagonian myth being for sale, and about the history of workers' repression and the recent ethno poetry – as a way to talk, perhaps, *from* Patagonia. More than a closing for the collection, his piece is an opening to new visions of revisions of Patagonia.

The collection aims to both 'undermine any impression of a unified body of texts' and to reflect 'all realms experience'. As a whole, it falls slightly short of these goals. First of all, the chapters are unified around a common theme and set of research questions; each provides an intriguing analysis of the Patagonia; and the contributions complement each other quite well. This reviewer is, thus, happy that the volume does not achieve the first goal. Second, the volume promises diversity (non-academic voices), and a reading of current conflicts in the area. In this regard, the collection falls short of the high expectations set in its introduction. But this is a minor quibble about a limitation that the editors acknowledge in the preface. It should not detract from the merit of the individual chapters and value of bringing them together.

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