



**Megan A. Norcia.** *Gaming Empire in Children's British Board Games, 1836-1860.* Studies in Childhood, 1700 to the Present Series. New York: Routledge, 2019. Illustrations. 274 pp. \$155.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-367-20935-3.

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Megan A. Norcia's *Gaming Empire in Children's British Board Games, 1836-1860* is a post-colonial reading of a number of tabletop children's games produced in the mid-nineteenth century. The games are fascinating material artifacts from the period, rare objects now, about which most current scholars of the Victorian era know very little. Norcia is to be commended for her determination in finding and analyzing these games. Her appendices list more than seventy in total, published between 1759 and 1902 (the vast majority from the first half of the nineteenth century), and for most of them she has provided a capsule description. In the book itself, a small selection of these games is critically analyzed in terms of the narratives that structure them and the visual elements that give life to them, and in terms of ludology—what can be ascertained about how they were played. While the specific analysis of individual games is compelling, and the case for paying attention to this class of games is well made, some of the larger claims of the book overreach.

Norcia discusses the general character of these tabletop games, providing some biographical histories of the publishers and a short description of the likely consumers. All the games discussed in any length in the book were tabletop games: usually a combination of paper and linen

playing surfaces onto which maps, illustrations, and playing spaces were printed. Players would move tokens around the board, using a teetotum (a numerically marked spinning top) to determine the number of spaces to move. Depending on the game, landing on certain spaces might result in advancing or being sent back on the game path, losing a turn, and/or losing other game tokens. All the games examined in the book relied on chance rather than strategy, but they still clearly had both a recreational and pedagogic purpose; indeed, some were produced by educational publishers. As Norcia notes, these types of board games developed alongside popular mapmaking, and the spatial organization of the world features prominently in many of these games. Those examined by Norcia seem to most obviously have been designed to help children understand geography, history, and Britain's place within the world. This "improving" purpose, along with their price point, indicate the target consumer of these products was the middle class—perhaps as much as 20 percent of the population in the middle decades of the nineteenth century.

Unfortunately, Norcia was hampered in her efforts to establish the popularity of these games by the lack of available sales figures. She claims that the games were popular because there were

many different titles that were produced in “staggering numbers” (p. 14). This claim is not convincing. The only publication figure Norcia has is the untestable marketing claim by one publisher, John Betts, that he had produced twelve thousand games by 1855 (p. 10). But Norcia cannot tell us if that figure incorporates just one title or the entire catalogue of Betts’s games. And while undoubtedly there was a market for geographical and history games, it is unclear the extent of this niche within the larger tabletop games market, which included morally improving games, natural history and astronomical games, and non-geographical variations on the long-popular *Game of Goose*.

After an introduction that places early Victorian games in a variety of contexts, the eight games that are analyzed in depth by Norcia are done so in pairs, in a sequence of chapters according to theme. In chapter 2, she shows how William Spooner’s *Voyage of Discovery* (1836) displayed the violence inherent in European practices of exploration, wherein the quest for profit led to the imposition of unequal trade relationships with indigenous peoples. In contrast, Norcia suggests that Betts’s *A Tour through the British Colonies* (1855) demonstrated the imperial project through the practice of transforming colonial spaces into productive agrarian economies, urban settings, and British institutions. Chapter 3 concentrates on the politics of imperial display. Using two games about the Great Exhibition of 1851, the power and authority of the empire is shown by Henry Smith Evans’s *The Crystal Palace Game* (1851), wherein complex ideas about progress, technology, and British imperial power are transposed onto a relatively simple narrative game. Meanwhile, in Spooner’s *Comic Game of the Great Exhibition of 1851* (1851), those same ideas are satirized in the illustrations of famous cartoonist George Cruikshank. Two games relating the story of Britain’s colonization of North America are analyzed in chapter 4, contrasting Britain’s supposed beneficent rule compared to its rivals. Edward Wallis’s *Game of the Star Spangled Banner* (1844)

and E. and M. A. Ogilvy’s *Columbia or the Land of the West* (1850-60) are shown to marginalize the indigenous populations and shine light on the shameful institution of slavery. Norcia suggests that the games demonstrate a British sense of superiority toward the United States and even actively discourage players from immigrating to a place where slavery is still practiced and where one was likely to encounter ferocious wild animals (and implicitly, people). Two final games are briefly analyzed in the conclusion: William Sallis’s *Pyramid of History* (1851), which depicts the acceleration of historical progress from biblical beginnings, culminating in the reign of Queen Victoria, and the Edwardian game *From the Ranks to Commander in Chief* (1904), a game about progress up through military ranks of the British army (a piece of meritocratic fiction by the game maker, since the first and only soldier to rise from private to field marshal was William Robertson in 1920), which is analyzed for its militaristic theme and inclusion of imperial locales.

This is a work of material culture criticism, shaped largely by the ideas found in the scholarship of Edward Said and subsequent postcolonial literary scholars, but Norcia also brings to bear, fruitfully, cultural scholarship on childhood, literacy, maps and the geographical imagination, and visual culture. Although this could be perceived as grinding a disciplinary axe, the historical scholarship referenced in Norcia’s book is not as impressive. Far too much historical context is gleaned from just a handful of secondary sources, which leads to some questionable conclusions. To point to just one example: Norcia suggests in her opening discussion of Spooner’s *Voyage of Discovery* that the game’s “discovery” is almost exclusively commercial, teaching the players about the unequal exchange economy in which resistance to European commerce is met with armed force. Norcia’s analysis then connects this commerce-backed-up-by-violence worldview with the slaughter visited on Sudanese insurgents by the British at the Battle of Omdurman in 1898: “It was

not their advanced weapons that enabled this slaughter, but a critically imbalanced imperial economy that valued the safeguarding of trade over the lives of those who opposed it” (p. 25). Her point about naturalizing unequal imperial exchange is a reasonable one, but Omdurman seems to have been chosen for the shocking number of casualties rather than as a compelling example of this process. Surely the Opium Wars of the 1840s and 1860s would have been a far better case to highlight, seeing as they led to the “unequal treaties” with China—a clear case of imbalanced trade enforced by military force—and are more chronologically appropriate to the game under discussion. In contrast, the origins of Omdurman lie in a proto-nationalist revolt and the determination of the British to avenge an earlier imperial defeat. By this time in the trajectory of imperial expansion (the 1880s and after), motives and circumstances other than just imperial commerce drove British actions—a change evident in a source used by Norcia, Tim Parson’s *The British Imperial Century: A World History Perspective* (2012). The point is that historical scholarship on the character of British imperialism shows that it evolved significantly over the nineteenth century: historians debate how, when, and why it changed, but there is consensus that its character and meaning were understood differently in the 1890s than in the 1830s. The relative lack of attention to recent historical scholarship is a pity since work on imperial culture by historians has ballooned in the last thirty years, generating a number of contentious debates about the impact of empire on Britain, on the problem of conceiving empire through the spatial metaphor of metropole and periphery, on the diversity of experience across the empire, and on the very idea of “imperial culture”—but practically none of it makes it into her discussion, with the notable exception of Bernard Porter’s deeply flawed *The Absent-Minded Imperialists: Empire, Society, and Culture in Britain* (2004), which is used mostly as a foil to argue against.[1]

Ultimately, Norcia wants to take the games she has found “and the ideological work they do” seriously, which is admirable. Norcia argues that the postcolonial lens encourages “looking for moments where marginalized or silenced agencies can be recovered or imagined” (p. 194). However, it is hard to learn much about the marginalized agencies from the games or about how the players of these games understood their meaning. We certainly see that these commercial publishers simplified British history and offered an understanding of the world for children in ways that can be understood as ideological (as, arguably, all education is). Indigenous peoples and places are present in the games only as objects to use or exploit; slavery is something that others do and is implicitly condemned, effectively erasing or minimizing British participation in the Atlantic slave trade; and history is depicted as progress, with the British seeing themselves sitting at the apex of both. In and of themselves, these characterizations just confirm earlier analyses of the broad contours of early Victorian culture and, frankly, are less attentive to the nuances and relational agencies found in existing accounts of early Victorian engagement with empire.[2] At best, we learn only a little more about how early Victorian commercial publishers viewed the world and how the “other” was supposed to be perceived (or, indeed, erased from view).

Moreover, Norcia argues that the ideological training of these games had more significant consequences later in the century. She suggests that “the games ‘invited’ players to put their pieces on the board and rehearse participation in the imperial enterprise. The significance of the smallest moment in which the child’s hand moves a piece across a map on a game board has global implications” (p. 194). This linkage—exposure to early nineteenth-century imperial ideology leads to an imperialist identity in adulthood and thence to imperialist activity later in the century—is suggestive but also too reductive. In Norcia’s account historical nuances are flattened out: she suggests

that children playing “empire” games in the 1830s or 1850s were taught lessons that could readily be applied to the real world in the 1870s or 1890s or after. As noted above, some attention to the scholarship on the evolution of the character of the empire and of its understanding within domestic culture over the course of the nineteenth century fundamentally complicates such an assertion.

#### Notes

[1]. For a fair-minded summation of the critique of Porter’s views, see Stuart Ward, “Echoes of Empire,” *History Workshop Journal* 61 (2006): 264-78; and for Porter’s response to his many critics, see “Further Thoughts on Imperial-Absent-Mindness,” *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 36, no. 1 (2008): 101-17. For alternative views of the impact of the empire from the time Porter’s book was published, see Andrew S. Thompson, *The Empire Strikes Back? The Impact of Imperialism on Britain from the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (New York: Longman, 2005); and John Darwin, *The Empire Project: The Rise and Fall of the British World-System, 1830-1970* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). On the debates about imperial culture, see Richard Price, “One Big Thing: Britain, Its Empire and Their Imperial Culture,” *Journal of British Studies* 45, no. 3 (2006): 602-27; Stephen Howe, ed., *The New Imperial Histories Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2010); and Andrew S. Thompson, *Writing Imperial Histories* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013). For a sympathetic treatment of the possibilities of postcolonial theory within imperial history, see Dane Kennedy, “Imperial History and Post-Colonial Theory,” *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 24, no. 3 (1996): 345-63; and Dane Kennedy, “The Boundaries of Oxford’s Empire,” *The International History Review* 13, no. 3 (2001): 604-22.

[2]. Two acclaimed, but very different, examples of the growing body of work that find similar ideological currents in early Victorian culture as Norcia but attempt to actually explain its develop-

ment and recover a nuanced range of their subject’s experience are Catherine Hall, *Civilizing Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination, 1830-1865* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); and Richard Price, *Making Empire: Colonial Encounters and the Creation of Imperial Rule in Nineteenth-Century Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

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