

Introduction

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The short story came into its own during the era of high imperialism, and, with it, a new literary genre was born: the imperial short story. Across the world, writers such as Rudyard Kipling, Katherine Mansfield, Gertrude Page, and John Buchan scrambled to supply a readership eager for compact tales of colonial settlement, encounters, and adventure. But who was this new audience, how did it read these narratives, and why was the short story seemingly so well suited to giving a popular account of empire? An indirect answer to these questions was given by the *African Review* of May 1898 in its report of a speech given by Rudyard Kipling at the Anglo-African Writers Club in which he had called for listeners to extend their sympathy and support to the ‘strong men who are building up our Empire’ (Kipling 1898: n. pag.). Kipling’s speech appeared in the *African Review* alongside an unsigned comic poem which offered an alternative perspective on the proceedings. The poem’s speaker, ‘an ’umble waiter’, expresses his excitement at having the opportunity to serve the celebrated Rudyard Kipling, ‘a genius out an’ out’. Though only vaguely aware of Kipling’s standing as a poet, he is a fervent enthusiast of his short stories: ‘by Gom, sir, they’re A1! / I’ve laughed an’ cried, an’ felt as creepy as can be.’ Their protagonists, he explains, ‘are all real live pals to me’ (qtd. in Kipling and Cohen 1965: 37). Roused by Kipling’s speech, the waiter concludes with a passionate declaration of patriotic violence: ‘Well this ’ere Kipling’, ’e’s a man, an’ no mistake [...] Oh—this waitin’, chuck it, let’s go out an’ fight, / I should like to punch some fellow’s ’ead for good old England’s sake!’ (1965: 38).

For all its crudity, this caricature of Kipling’s readership effectively illustrates one model of the relationship between short stories, readers, and empire. The poem acknowledges Kipling’s dual status as a public figure engaged in advancing the political project of empire and as a writer of stories that, by dint of their form and accessibility, had wide-ranging popular appeal. Short stories, on this view, had the potential to function as politics by other means, reaching spectacularly across class

Donovan, Stephen and Leonard Driscoll. 2017. “Introduction.” *Nordic Journal of English Studies* 16(2):1-11.

boundaries, from the author's immediate audience of invited dignitaries to the otherwise invisible serving staff. The speaker may lack the sophistication of the clubmen—and, by implication, the readers of the *African Review*—but their shared appreciation of Kipling's stirring tales of British India brings him into the fold of a common ideology based on jingoism. The poem's idealization of the Tory and working-class reader is its underlying conceit, attesting to its heightened awareness of the burgeoning reading public as well as to its recognition of the political instrumentality of the short story as a form.

It is not hard to see why the *African Review*'s poem ascribed such potent political agency to the imperial short story as a genre. Brevity entailed constraints to the number of protagonists and their characterization as well as to the degree of narrative exposition and description, but it also served to concentrate the rhetorical, commercial, and aesthetic possibilities inherent in the form. Short stories provided intense snapshots of colonial experience, and they could be written and published quickly, making them better suited than novels for commentary upon recent or current events, including more or less unvarnished political or social messages. While these qualities of immediacy and directness are sometimes overstated, the prominence of short-story writing in the careers of writers such as Buchan and Kipling who were directly involved in debates over imperial policy nonetheless serves to remind us of the historical importance of this literary subgenre. For many writers, including those of very different political and ideological stripes, the relationship between short fiction and empire was both axiomatic and intimate.

This formal-ideological proximity also owes much to the historical coincidence of developments in the literary market and in imperial policy in the years between roughly 1880 and 1914. The short story as a distinct form with its own affordances and possibilities became a focus of creative and commercial attention for fiction writers at the same time as the emergence of a markedly new approach to empire in both culture and politics. The high water-mark of the 'age of storytellers', as Mike Ashley has termed this period of innovation in the short story, was also that of the 'New Imperialism' during which Britain's ruling elites responded to growing competition from other European powers by pursuing a more ideologically proactive and expansionist policy overseas. Given impetus by the Berlin Conference of 1884-1885 and the resulting 'Scramble for

Africa', the European powers established a framework for the annexation and colonisation of vast swathes of the African continent. It also included the consolidation, by the British government, of protectorates in Egypt and elsewhere; the prosecution of the second Boer War (1899-1902); and a series of protracted feuds with European rivals over access to trade routes such as the Suez Canal. This more openly assertive attitude to Imperialism displayed by Britain in this period found support and expression in chauvinistic cultural representations of British superiority in the popular songs, paintings, and literary works of the time.

In tandem with these political-cultural developments, the number of short stories published in Britain began to grow rapidly. The 1880s boom in short fiction came as publishers and writers belatedly began to appreciate the commercial and artistic potential of the short story as a form in its own right (as opposed to merely a lesser version of the novel), in which respect they had lagged behind their counterparts in America and Europe (Baldwin 1993: 23). As a number of critics have noted, this period of rapid maturation in the literary market was underpinned by three decisive factors: the Education Acts of 1876 and 1880, which dramatically increased the literacy rates of the country and consequently established a far larger and more demographically diverse reading population; technological innovations in printing, which, by slashing the costs of publishing, increased the number of publications on the market; and the collapse of the relationship between the circulating libraries and publishers, which caused demand to move away from longer three-volume novels to shorter forms (Baldwin 1993: 25; Orel 1986: 185; Malcolm and Malcolm 2008: 9). Although these literary developments were, of course, independent of the larger ideological shift in British imperial policy, the dramatic expansion in the market for short stories in the late nineteenth century stimulated a voracious appetite for new situations, new subjects, and new settings. The writers whose livelihoods were made possible by this historic intersection of ideological and material factors readily turned for inspiration to the flood of media reports, cultural representations, and commercial ephemera which the New Imperialism had unleashed. Not least, they drew upon their own first-hand experiences of empire life.

At the centre of the short story boom lay the periodical press, in which short stories jostled cheek-by-jowl with a textual ocean of news coverage and tit-bits relating to Britain's global presence. Large-

circulation illustrated magazines such as the *Strand*, *Pearson's*, *Windsor Magazine*, and *Cassell's* typified the kind of new publishing venues which commissioned imperial short fiction in vast quantities in this period. In them, readers encountered a fictional empire alongside and interwoven with the real one. 'In all this splendid abundance of fiction,' promised an advertisement for the Christmas edition of *Windsor Magazine*, 'the world of fact will not be forgotten'. In the *Strand*, for example, short stories interspersed articles about political tensions between English and French colonists in China, canal building in Egypt, and personal accounts of journeys through South Africa but also adverts for products such as Burgess' Lion Ointment 'as used by our colonial cousins', the 1913 Earl's Court Imperial Services Exhibition, and even the magazine's own Purchasing Agency, which sought to make commodities advertised in the publication's pages available to their readers living and working in the colonies. Imperial short stories must therefore be understood not merely in terms of their literary properties, internal and contextual, but within a comprehensive network of other representations of Empire, all now being relayed to an almost unthinkably diverse readership.

It was this audience and the bustling market of imperial representations which the *African Review's* poem had in mind when offering its characterization of a malleable working-class Kipling reader. It may be that this abstracted reading subject, for the *African Review* and its actual readers, served as a comforting simplification of the more disquietingly complex relations being activated by this new and dynamic short fiction. Whatever the case, the poem attests to the inescapable presence of this new mass market for writers of imperial short stories while also highlighting a cluster of concerns that continues to exercise literary historians today: on the one hand, the relationship between the empire, political agency, and literary production; and, on the other, that between empire, readers, and the material conditions of production and reception around 1900.

This cluster of concerns provides the common focus for the essays commissioned for this special issue of the *Nordic Journal of English Studies*. Exploring the qualities that defined the imperial short story as a genre, each essay examines a single work by a diverse cohort of writers: Rudyard Kipling, John Buchan, Gertrude Page, Rider Haggard, and Katherine Mansfield. Along with detailed analyses of how these writers

made use of the unique possibilities offered by the short story form, the essays in this collection explore the contexts, literary and historical, which shaped how they were written and read. Spanning the period between 1880 and 1914 and mobilizing a range of theoretical and methodological perspectives, they trace the divergent aesthetic and political factors which impacted the composition and reception of these works, returning in each case to special attributes which defined the short story as a form during the high imperial period.

Late-nineteenth-century readers of Rudyard Kipling's stories provide the focus for Simon Frost's essay. Drawing on a novel combination of comparative world literature and book history, Frost seeks to 'enfranchise Kipling's early readers' and reminds us that the preoccupations we have as twenty-first-century readers differ markedly from this initial reading public. While Kipling's racist and orientalist sensibility are overwhelmingly obvious to a modern audience and rightly condemned, Frost argues for 'a degree of sensitivity for the early material conditions of reception among different reading communities throughout the Empire'. To illustrate this approach, he offers a close reading of Kipling's 'The Strange Ride of Morrowbie Jukes' (1885), whose protagonist, a civil engineer named Jukes, finds himself accidentally stranded in a strange kind of open-air prison. Its inmates are technically undead: having recovered from a seemingly fatal illness only to find that their death has already been registered, they are sequestered away from the world by the authorities who are now unable to administratively accommodate them. Frost reads this story alongside 'Garib Ki Hay' (1911), a short story by the Indian modernist writer 'Munshi' Premchand, in order to compare the underlying theme of Kipling's story—that British rationality is the remedy for self-defeating Indian degeneracy—with Premchand's own depiction of a similarly dangerous seam of 'rational irrationality' in traditional Indian society. Drawing on the textual history of Kipling's story and its various paratexts, Frost teases out a more progressive subtext than is immediately evident to the casual modern reader.

The empire's best-known storyteller is also the subject of Richard Ambrosini's essay, which argues that Kipling's 'The Man Who Would be King' (1885) reveals the interaction between late-nineteenth-century conceptions of empire and the imperial short story as an emergent genre. Ambrosini proposes that Kipling's story, written just prior to its author's

relocation to London, marks a key threshold in both his writing career and the history of the imperial short story. The story presents the tale of two dissolute colonial adventurers and their quixotic attempt to lay claim to Kafiristan (now in Afghanistan) through the voice of a Kiplingesque Anglo-Indian journalist. In this narrative structure, Ambrosini argues, Kipling can be seen to realign his public persona, away from the local relationship he had established within the Anglo-Indian community and towards a new, international authorial identity. The story's thematics, it can thus be seen, parallel the realignment of geopolitical attitudes toward India by the same modern communications technologies of 'Railways, uniform Postage, and the Electric Telegraph' which the story repeatedly invokes. The technological advances, Ambrosini concludes, simultaneously 'changed forever the role of colonial writers and, in the process, made possible [...] the "imperial short story"'.

Turning to an author who went on to become a colonial administrator, Kate Macdonald examines the way in which Buchan used his short stories to press home a critique of contemporary policies towards empire. Macdonald begins by surveying Buchan's early writing, which she locates within an often overlooked discourse of imperial rule. Buchan, she proposes, advocated Edwardian administrative and technocratic forms of management in preference to the militarism privileged by earlier writers. Tracing the contours of this perspective in his short story 'A Lucid Interval' (1911), she shows how he mobilized the formal properties of short fiction to intervene in contemporary political debate. The story, which is told from the perspective of Ram Singh, an Indian landowner, relates the events of two political dinner parties separated by a fortnight. At the first, Singh serves his guests (three Liberal MPs and a socialite) a drug-laced curry that removes their inhibitions. Chaos ensues as the drug causes the MPs to spend the following weeks espousing (and acting upon) political opinions at odds with their own party-political convictions. The short story, Macdonald suggests, offered Buchan a vehicle for satirising the myopic opportunism of establishment politicians who, he believed, were making decisions about an Empire they did not understand. The story, as Macdonald reads it, contrasts Buchan's personal conviction about empire as a civilizing force with the anarchy threatened by the ascendancy of the Liberal party in Britain.

The more critical view of empire expressed by Katherine Mansfield in 'How Pearl Button was Kidnapped' (1912) is the focus of Roslyn Jolly's essay. Set in New Zealand, the story describes from the point of view of a young white (Pakeha) girl her trip to the sea with two Maori women. The story stages a double perspective on events: for her parents and the Pakeha community the incident, the 'kidnapping' of the title, represents a primal threat, while for Pearl the day's events represent an enjoyable intermission in an otherwise staid colonial existence. Throughout the highly compressed tale, Mansfield uses a naively childlike perspective, a focalizer which, Jolly argues, allows for a striking use of colour and sensation as well as a radically different perspective on indigenous Maori culture. Jolly shows how the interaction of two distinct contexts underpins Mansfield's use of this particular narrative method. First, Jolly examines the story within the context of its original publication venue, the Modernist little magazine *Rhythm*. In this context, the story's 'pastoral-primitivist endorsement of liberty, nature and spontaneity over enslavement, civilisation and conformity' fitted the Fauvist aesthetic of many of those connected with *Rhythm*, including its editor John Middleton Murry. Jolly further contextualises the short story in light of contemporary colonial adventure fiction featuring children (including novels by R.M. Ballantyne, R.L. Stevenson, and Frederick Marryat) and 'authorised' Imperial literature published by the Religious Tract Society, where child kidnapping was a popular theme. Juxtaposing these texts, Jolly shows how Mansfield parodies and challenges the assumptions about imperial superiority and indigenous incapacity which underpinned adventure fiction and the discourse of child rescue. Mansfield's story, she concludes, should be seen as making a covert critique of human relations proscribed by colonialism.

Imperial short stories drew frequently on locations and situations newly brought under British control in the period of New Imperialism, with Egypt proving an especially popular theme. The British occupation of Egypt in 1882 and the commencement of the so-called 'veiled protectorate' made the country more accessible to British archaeologists and tourists keen to explore Egypt's ancient past. It also brought the British into conflict with France and eventually with Egyptian nationalist movements. In his essay, Leonard Driscoll argues that H. Rider Haggard's story 'Smith and the Pharaohs', a long short story published in *The Strand Magazine*, registers these conflicts in its account of a British

archaeologist who is confronted by the ghosts of Egyptian pharaohs while trying to track down the burial place of the ancient queen, Ma Mee. Driscoll draws on Haggard's polemical newspaper articles about Egyptian archaeology to show how Haggard's story engaged with contemporary debates on the post-exhumation fate of Egyptian antiquities. Yet closer examination of the story's relationship to its publishing context (*The Strand Magazine* and its readership) reveals that Haggard's account of revenant mummies also expresses a far more ambivalent characterisation of the relationship between ancient history and Empire. In tailoring his story to the readership of *The Strand*, and drawing on Conservative, nostalgic constructions of pharaonic Egypt as an ancestral image of imperial dominance, Haggard's story displays a contradictory and unresolved tension between this past and a contemporary fear of nationalist violence.

In the final contribution to this special issue, Stephen Donovan examines Gertrude Page's 'A Terror That Saved' (1912), a romantic genre story set in Rhodesia, in relation to the reading habits and attitudes of magazine readers in Britain. Connecting the story's frontier setting to the special political status of Rhodesia in British culture, he argues that the modes of identification and libidinal gratifications which such stories offered contemporaries should be understood in terms of changing domestic social conditions, rather than the colonial relations which form their ostensible subject matter. Drawing inspiration from Richard Ohmann's landmark study of magazine culture and the rise of a professional-managerial class in fin-de-siècle America, he proposes that a comparable social dynamic may be discerned in the wave of empire-themed stories which filled popular periodicals in early-twentieth-century Britain. The imperial short story on this view stands revealed as having a profoundly different significance for domestic readers in Britain than it did for ideologically committed authors on the frontiers of empire itself.

Ranging from ghost stories set in British India to an infant's visit to the New Zealand seaside, this issue of the *Nordic Journal of English Studies* comprises a variety of subjects, themes, and styles. Its breadth of material and approaches, it is hoped, will both inspire further reconsiderations of the place of short fiction in the history of imperial culture and suggest possible avenues for including the imperial short story in survey courses on empire fiction and the short story itself. In a

recent discussion of the teaching value of short fiction, Ruth Robbins notes that because students are able to read a greater variety of short stories than novels in the time available to them, they can become more confident about identifying aspects of genre and form without resorting to easy generalisations (2010: 112). At the same time, the brevity of this literary genre means that these texts can be taught in relation to, and as illustrative of, a range of theoretical and methodological approaches, including narratological analysis, print history, and reception studies. A largely overlooked prism onto geopolitical relations and literary culture alike, the imperial short story has a pedagogical potential which we have only just begun to realize.

Works Cited

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Appendix to the Special Issue—Additional Material and Resources

Full texts of works discussed in this issue

Rudyard Kipling, *The Phantom Rickshaw* (Indian Railway Library; London, 1888), containing ‘The Strange Ride of Morrowbie Jukes’ (1885) and ‘The Man Who Would Be King’ (1888)
<https://archive.org/details/phantomrickshawo00kiplrich>

Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine 187 (Jan-June 1910), containing John Buchan, ‘A Lucid Interval’ (1910)
<https://archive.org/details/blackwoodsmagazi187edinuoft>

Rhythm (September 1912), containing Lili Heron (pseud. Katherine Mansfield), ‘How Pearl Button was Kidnapped’ (1912)
http://modjourn.org/render.php?id=1159896242992466&view=mjp_object

H. Rider Haggard, *Smith and the Pharaohs* (London, 1921), containing ‘Smith and the Pharaohs’ (1912)
<https://archive.org/details/smithandpharaohs00haggrich>

Gertrude Page, ‘A Terror That Saved’ (*The Quiver*, October 1912)
http://s000.tinyupload.com/index.php?file_id=66498185627081099514

Recommended internet resources

A. Authors

1. Kipling

[The Kipling Society](#)

[Kipling's Big Break](#) (video)

[Kipling's Imperialism](#)

[“Mr Kipling's Early Stories” by Henry James](#)

2. Haggard

[Visual Haggard](#)

[In and Out of Africa: The Adventures of H. Rider Haggard](#)

[Pathé interview with H. Rider Haggard](#) (video)

3. Gertrude Page

[Woburn Sands Collection](#)

4. Katherine Mansfield

[The Katherine Mansfield Society](#)

[Katherine Mansfield Biography](#)

[The Katherine Mansfield Collection](#)

[Rhythm at the Modernist Journals Project](#)

[Modernist Magazines Seminar on Rhythm](#) (video)

5. John Buchan

[The John Buchan Society](#)

B. Short story (general)

[Classic Short Stories](#)

[A Short History of the Short Story](#)

[The Short Review](#)

[The Victorian Short Story: A Brief History](#)

[The Victorian Short Fiction Project](#)

[The Strand Magazine at The Internet Archive](#)

C. Empire and literature (general)

[Echoes of Empire](#)

[The Victorian World: Colonies and Dependencies](#)

Online exhibition [Submarine Telegraphs](#) (King's College London)

Stephen Luscombe's [British Empire](#) site, particularly the [Map Room](#) and the [Glossary](#)

Online exhibition [The Partition of Africa](#) (King's College London)