

to know what was going on” (p. 28). In the age of deeply studied colonialism and post-colonialism, Fink has chosen not to add a commentary about the complicated historical relationship between the Catholic Church and indigenous populations.

Fink’s conclusion regarding governmental policy towards immigrants and their civil liberties is hopeful. He foresees some possibility if the collaboration between the migrants and local advocacy groups continues to develop. His mention of the minimal penalties placed on large corporations for using an “illegal labor force” (p. 199) makes the reader aware of the possibility of much larger influences affecting the recruitment, use and misuse of undocumented laborers. One hopes that Fink’s future work will be on larger policy issues that bring and keep the Maya in Morgantown. Our national need for inexpensive labor and our complacency as individuals lose their hands in poultry plants and suffocate in trailer-trucks is the most unstudied enigma in the maze of immigration.

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LITERARY/CULTURAL STUDIES

Informal Empire: Mexico and Central America in Victorian Literature. By Robert D. Aguirre. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005. Pp. 296. Illustrations. Map. Notes. Index. \$59.95 cloth; \$19.95 paper.

This book makes a welcome contribution to several fields. To the considerable literature on Mexico’s relations with the United States, it adds a far less familiar story of British engagement in Mexico and Central America during the nineteenth century. And to Victorian Studies, which has recently devoted a good deal of attention to Britain’s imperial ventures in Asia and Africa, it provides a look at the British empire in Latin America. Concentrating on the years between Mexican Independence in 1821 and the Spanish American War of 1898, Aguirre studies how Britain established an “informal empire” in Mexico and Central America, one that was characterized more by desire for the acquisition and control of objects than the possession of territory, more by what would today be called “soft diplomacy” than military aggression. How that acquisitive desire was realized in freak shows, travel narratives, museum exhibits, scenic panoramas, diplomatic correspondence, and adventure novels is the subject of Aguirre’s book.

Each of the four chapters of *Informal Empire* looks at a different aspect of British involvement in Mexican and Central American cultural affairs. Aguirre’s methods combine archival research with careful close readings of published materials from both English and Latin American sources. One of the book’s most valuable contributions is its insight about how Britain’s relations with Latin America differed from its other colonial ventures while still being colored by the assumptions that guided

its self-understanding as an imperial power. These relationships were shaped by the fact that Mexican and Central American societies—with their strict social hierarchies and strong identification with Europe—remained largely colonial in nature despite their recent independence from Spain; by Britain’s awareness of the emerging power of the United States in the hemisphere; and by British fascination with Latin American history and people. The British treated Latin American nations more as unequal partners than as people to be conquered through the blunt imposition of imperial authority. Condemning the Spanish for their wasteful plundering of the Americas, the British cast themselves as uniquely suited to appreciate and conserve the valuable antiquities of Mexico and Central America. But as Aguirre sees it, there was little difference between the two empires since “economic and cultural plunder rode on parallel tracks” (p. 28). While the majority of the book focuses on British materials, each chapter also includes responses by Latin American elites who, in their eagerness for European approval, often became complicit in British appropriation of their most valued heritage at the same time that they were deeply concerned with preserving it for themselves in the service of national glorification. Few emerged blameless from these negotiations. Aguirre is also concerned with the Indian populations who had the most rightful claim to these antiquities but whose voices were rarely heard during this period. Having acknowledged their importance, he confesses that a lack of evidence limits him to “suggesting the ways in which the indigenous presence that haunts these discourses constitutes a kind of colonial unconscious” (p. xix).

While Aguirre cannot be blamed for the absence of evidence that may not exist, *Informal Empire* does not always fully realize its ambition to represent the relationship between Britain and Latin America as a dialogue. This is a slim volume, which comes in at under 150 pages without the footnotes. But despite its brevity, there are portions of this book that feel excessive, as if a fine article has been bloated into book-length form. Much of the evidence overlaps from one chapter to another: the impresario William Bullock is a major figure in both chapters one and two, which make up nearly half the book, and the same Latin American interlocutors appear frequently to represent the Creole counter-response. But this slight redundancy is forgivable in light of the book’s most interesting moments, such as its discussion of diplomatic correspondence Aguirre has gleaned from Colonial and Foreign Office archives, which has never before been examined by scholars and adds a fascinating chapter to the history of nineteenth-century British imperialism. *Informal Empire* is well-written and engaging: its tendency to repeat or belabor certain points can be overlooked since it is providing a nuanced treatment of important, and relatively unfamiliar terrain.

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