

Marysa Demoor, *A Cross-Cultural History of Britain and Belgium, 1815-1918: Mudscapes and Artistic Entanglements* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022, 288 pp., ISBN 9783030879259).

*A Cross-Cultural History of Britain and Belgium, 1815-1918* explores the artistic connections and socio-cultural exchanges between the two countries from the Battle of Waterloo to the First World War. In a remarkable count of ten chapters, the book achieves its main objective of considering the significance of Belgium in the construction of British identity and its influence on the careers of British authors and artists. The study commences by presenting Belgium as a country that ‘became the burial ground of hundreds of thousands of British military’ (5).

Following the Introduction, Chapters 2 to 5 and Chapter 8 examine the discursive and visual responses to these battlefields and deaths, with a particular focus on the impact of Waterloo on British culture and identity. Chapters 7 and 9 address another, yet equally important, topic on a shared ‘fantasy language’ (6) between the British and Belgian artistic communities. Chapter 6 (‘A Royal Example – Creating a European Family’) acts as a stand-alone section that demonstrates the political and ‘romantic’ (141) relationships between the two monarchies and their heads of state from 1817. Spanning across a wide range of literary texts and artworks, including fiction, poetry, letters, portraits, and paintings, the book sets cultural history in dialogue with the studies of travel writing, transnationality, and postcolonialism to contextualise the sentiments associated with Britishness and Englishness in the long nineteenth century and beyond.

Demoor’s analysis of the cross-cultural construction of national identity revolves around the concepts of ‘othering’ and ‘otherness’. The confrontation and negotiation with cultural and religious otherness lead travel writers to recognise and understand their own identity. Detailing the creative effect of the British encounter with the Belgian ‘Other’ in the long nineteenth century, Demoor adds to the sustained critical interest in the impact of othering on the formation of national identity – a field of study first pioneered by authors such as Benedict Anderson, Linda Colley, Marjorie Morgan, George O. Ndege, and Michal Jan Rozbicki. Literary and artistic representations of ‘otherness’ captured various forms of stereotypical reaction or hypocrisy to foreign culture, thereby shaping a sense of national superiority and cultural supremacy in British identity. By reading into a catalogue of battlefield literature and travel writing, Demoor not only affirms the intersection of cultures and histories (*histoire croisée*) as an impressive source of artistic inspiration that contributes to the ‘birth of a person’s authorship’ (21).

She also asserts the potential of these artistic entanglements in producing a 'cultural imagined community' (141) that accounts for British nationalistic and colonial impulses.

In her definition of 'otherness' in travel writing, Demoor refers to the idea of the uncanny in British visitors' recognition of differences between individual and foreign identities. These feelings of strangeness and uneasiness brought about by ethnic disassociation and religious rejection constitute one of the underlying threads of the book. Yet the concept of the uncanny has not been applied more succinctly to other genres of work that, likewise, participate in the process of cultural inheritance. In particular, it is evaded from the discussion of the British adoption of Flemish grotesque fantasy in Chapter 7 ('Surrealist Entanglements'). The disturbing effect of the devilish or wicked depictions of monstrous subjects in British literature, I contend, is not achieved entirely by mythical and illusory inventions, but also by uncanny characters and setting that effectively blur the readers' perceptual experience of familiarity and unfamiliarity. For writers like Christina Rossetti and Lewis Carroll, the simultaneous resemblance of the real and the imaginary, the common and the foreign, signified a certain degree of association with Belgian artistic heritage and culture. At the same time, retained traces of disgust and rejection towards non-British social norms and manners.

Writers' imaginative treatment of othering and otherness had also resulted in the 'appropriation of the foreign land through the dead' (260). Attending to the literary works that emerged from the Battle of Waterloo and the Battle of Ypres, including Dante Gabriel Rossetti's 'On the Field of Waterloo' and Isaac Rosenberg's 'Dead Man's Dump', Demoor excavates from the Belgian soil or Flemish mud an embodied identity of British heroism and military victory that is associated with a 'burial idea' and the 'power of a corpse' (117). Chapter 8 ('From Ashes to Soil to Mud') elaborates on the notion of soil as a carrier of nationality and mud as 'an agent in the glorification of war and the assuaging of loss and death' (13). The metaphor of burial places as the return of a fallen soldier to the womb or to his home country illustrates an intriguing relationship between the earth and motherhood. Departing from Santanu Das's sensory apprehension of war trenches and Erich Maria Remarque's mothering of the national mud, Demoor perceives the earth as a maternal space of nurture and regeneration for British soldiers who were laid to rest in Flanders Fields.

Demoor's attempt to feminise the articulation of war graves would have benefited from a sustained engagement with the conventional womb/tomb rhyme or motif in the English poetic tradition, particularly in poems of the Great War. For instance, John Freeman's 'Armistice Day' ('The child in the dark womb/Stirred; dust settled in the tomb' [ll. 4-5]) and Eden Phillpotts's 'Verdun' ('Justice of myriad men still in the womb/[...] Two memories accurs'd; then in the tomb' [ll. 17-19]), would have served as relevant and illuminating examples. Another war poem by Phillpotts, aptly titled 'To

Belgium', laments the country as a 'grave' of the 'brave'. An analysis of the poem would substantiate Demoor's study of an embodied national identity that is closely related to burial practice and the land. Also, an examination of the poet as someone who was born in India and lived in England would have opened up new lines of inquiry into the discussion regarding British continental and colonial discourse. To advance the interdisciplinary dialogues on the shaping of 'a warm, motherly or mothering national mud' (201) as a symbol of protection and fertility, the book could have also indicated its potential contribution to the emerging field of ecofeminism in relation to the role of women and the earth during times of war and turmoil.

As to the subject of confrontation with the Other, Demoor claims in the Introduction that she has taken a similar approach to postcolonial theorists. Despite Belgium never being under British rule, the book examines the role of Belgium as 'another British colony with all the stereotypes and constructions of nationhood such an encounter entail' (22). Without any intention to comment on the 'attitude as unfair or objectionable', Demoor justifies her methodology by pointing to Belgium's contribution to the construction of 'what came to be seen as a British identity by visitors to key locations' (9).

However, the explanation has neglected the multifarious and complex nature of postcolonialism. Postcolonial studies do not merely focus on how identities are shaped by interactions between different cultures, and an examination of the 'artistic entanglements' between nations does not immediately necessitate a postcolonial approach. Cultural exchanges between the coloniser and the colonised are predicated on power imbalances in all aspects of life. Since Belgo-British relations do not involve the impact of imperial oppression, exploitation, resistance, acceptance, or tolerance on the cultural identities of indigenous peoples and settlers, any attempt at a postcolonial reading of their historical interaction would therefore be unfounded and invalid.

By bringing to light British writers' 'unexpected unearthing of the cultural riches' of Belgium, 'a country that harbours so many of the British dead' (77), during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, *A Cross-Cultural History of Britain and Belgium, 1815-1918* uncovers the unfathomable but dynamic depth of connection between the two countries in the subterranean production of national identity. Although the chronological arrangement of the book renders it difficult to forge a thematic continuity across chapters, Demoor has successfully, on the one hand, traced the effect of othering in the British appropriation of Belgium, its culture, and soil through the dead and 'realms of memory' (7), and, on the other hand, explained the cancellation of the othering in the imagined artistic encounter of Britain with the Low Countries. Demoor's revitalisation of the 'historical, cultural, economic, and genetic' (261) links between Britain and continental Europe serves as a timely reminder and celebration of their shared heritage and futures.