This is just one of the literary witnesses Robbie McLaughlan brings before us in a challenging book in which Victorian fin de siècle writing meets both Empire and early Western psychoanalysis. He refutes the postcolonial charge that missionary literature was mere hegemonic imperialism bearing down uniformly and unforgivingly on Africa by drawing on a range of written sources including missionary tracts, novels and polemical theory. He shows how Victorian mesmerism literature, for example, was filled with the occult, spiritualism, hypnosis, drugs and sexual transgression. But within this lexicon, the much-favoured image of the crazed African witch doctor was not simply a figure used to vent missionary frustration at the persistent attraction of “supernatural” beliefs among the indigenous, or a cheap missionary device to raise revenues at home; it also served to extend domestic anxieties about a tainted metropolitan underworld, a grotesque place fetid with urban contagion. Here, inside a cartographic void no less impenetrable than that of the Dark Continent, personal and moral disintegration lurked down every alleyway. Such transference, transgression fantasy and repression would become mainstays of 20th-century psychoanalysis.

Inevitably, this book presents some of the challenges posed by literary criticism for readers outside the discipline. The use of the present tense for the past and a lot of in-house references can be off-putting. Persevere! This is an exciting “must-read” for historians of late-Victorian imperialism. The stress on the contribution of popular missionary literature to metropolitan constructs of central Africa is to be welcomed. McLaughlan’s research provides more evidence of an Africa of “heterogeneous and dizzying multiplicity”, rather than the fixity of racism and otherwise beloved of orthodox postcolonial theorists. He nicely depicts the ambiguity in the belle époque’s view of the continent, with delightful vignettes such as the gazps of awe provoked by two exquisitely carved ivory leopards from the kingdom of Benin, presented to lucky old Queen Victoria, and the enthusiastic press coverage of Captain Hore’s 1893 exhibition in Pall Mall on central Africa, or as he advertised it, “Brightest Africa”. It helps that the chapters (14 in all) are short. And there are some lovely observations, including David Livingstone as “post-boy” for central Africa.

Although I look with admiration to such scholars to inject some much-needed variety into my ever-narrowing vocabulary (favourites here include “hauntology” and “cryptozoological”), there are a few too many “semantic accretions” for my sensibilities. Plus I’m not sure I know what a “sexual inversion” is, but then I am Welsh. Overall, however, this is a highly stimulating read that provokes many questions, including the matter of why, with such a sexy topic, the publisher chose a yellow-patterned cover with all the allure of a colour chart from Homebase.

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Territory of dreadful delight
Joanna Lewis hails a challenging ‘must-read’ for historians of late-Victorian imperialism

Re-Imagining the ‘Dark Continent’ in Fin de Siècle Literature
By Robbie McLaughlan
Edinburgh University Press
258pp, £70.00
ISBN 9780748647156
Published 1 October 2012

"I am the lover of the uncontained and immortal beauty. In the wilderness, I find something more dear and connate than in the streets and villages... especially in the distant line of the horizon, man beholds something as beautiful as his own nature.”

It was this sentiment expressed by Ralph Waldo Emerson that spurred Anglo-South African writer Olive Schreiner (1855-1920) to make a contribution to fin de siècle literature — as an émigré and as a woman. It was a field dominated by patriarchy, machismo and misogyny. Initially obliged to write under the Victorian equivalent of a porn-star moniker — Ralph Iron — Schreiner produced imaginative novels that would be much admired. True, her Africa was a land of ghosts, terrible excess, eerie absences and sadomasochistic violence. But it was also a place of great beauty, fecundity and spiritual purity, where an ancient heritage could be mapped on to a feminised landscape. And significantly it became a prelapsarian imaginative escape from the squalor, chaos, dirt and disease of the dystopia of English city life. Schreiner wrote to outwit depression and to retrace a transformed self, divided and disembodied through the displacement of emigration.

Borges and Memory: Encounters with the Human Brain
By Rodrigo Quiñ Quiroga
Translated by Juan Pablo Fernández
MIT Press, 226pp, £17.95
ISBN 9780262018210
Published 16 November 2012

Like me and many other neuroscientists who study memory and who find ourselves explaining what we do to non-neuroscientists, Rodrigo Quiñ Quiroga must often have encountered people who claim they have a bad memory — and then offer themselves as experi-
famous one is the cell that reacts to the actor Jennifer Aniston. This neuron not only reacts to different pictures of her but also to her written and spoken name, and stimuli related to her. Quian Quiroga links his discoveries to Funes’ capacity to remember every detail. Funes was not able to generalise information: for him, every event and each subject, animal or thing was unique and dissimilar to everything else. Thus, one theory is that Funes would lack these “Jennifer Aniston”-type neurons.

There are many books on neuroscience and memory for non-scientists. Perhaps the most important contribution of Borges and Memory to the literature is the way it is written: straight from the gut of the scientist. Quian Quiroga recounts the scientific facts and the history of the discoveries with all the curiosity and the fascination of a scientist taking his first steps (even though he is a seasoned researcher). A reader who is a scientist may, like me, rediscover the feelings that inspire our quest for questions and answers. For non-scientists, this book is the perfect way to get inside the mind of a researcher: Borges and Memory is as interesting as it is inspirational.

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The main question raised by Michael Shattock’s new book is whether any underlying pattern can be discerned in post-war UK higher education policy. A number of writers have pointed to an increase in state control as the nation’s economic performance faltered and governments looked to universities for help. Others, including this reviewer, see instead a gradual move towards market-based policies, of which the 2011 higher education White Paper represents the culmination (at least for now). Shattock rules out any such pattern: the sector’s development since 1945, he argues, “should not be seen as a progression...but a reflection of wider currents of economic and social change”.

Shattock considers five main issues, turning first to the matter of structure. He believes the rejection of the Robbins committee’s 1963 recommendation that the colleges of education should transfer to the university sector was a pivotal moment – and a backward step. It was a point at which the colleges might have been safeguarded, and it could have provided a useful precedent for other locally maintained institutions, such as the polytechnics. As it was, the creation in 1965 of the “binary line” was an unnecessary and ultimately futile policy – although an alternative view might be that the policy was so successful that the transition of polytechnics to university status was accomplished in 1992 with very little trouble. Turning to the issue of finance, Shattock identifies the most critical episodes as the rejection of the universities’ funding demands in 1962, which broke the link with the Treasury as the sponsor department; the 1973-74 oil crisis, which ended quinquennial funding; the University Grants Committee’s handling of cuts to state funding in 1981, paving the way for research selectivity; and the vice-chancellors’ revolt in 1995-96, which led to the Dearing report and variable fees.

The third subject weighed is research, and Shattock notes that the fusing of research policy and higher education policy would be to the latter’s detriment. The origins of selectivity are traced back to the final report of the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research in 1965. Whereas most commentators have drawn attention to the consequential concentration of research funds, Shattock emphasises instead the continuing influence of the research university model.

Fourth, he considers the growth of accountability. The first step was the agreement in 1996-97 that the Public Accounts Committee should have access to the universities’ books. It would lead to the creation of funding agencies more directly accountable to the government.

Another key change in this period was in quality assurance, stimulated in part by ministerial concerns about the effects of the post-1980s expansion. Shattock concludes by looking at institutional policymaking. In what is perhaps the book’s best chapter, he shows how, in the traditional institutions, there has been a strengthening of the position of management and lay governors at the expense of academic senates: management has always been stronger in the new institutions, with the directorate in effect substituting for the local education authority. Nevertheless, UK universities still enjoy a considerable degree of autonomy, especially in European terms.

Although the book covers a lot of ground, there are important limitations. There is no proper survey of the existing literature. This is especially an analysis of policymaking: there is no systematic attempt to review the impact of the various policies, although the author’s views on most of the major issues are clear. Shattock is on surer ground with the pre-1992 institutions than the post-1992 ones, and strongest of all on the 1985 Jarratt report and the move towards the corporate model of institutional governance.

There are some important factual lapses in the area of quality and standards. The attention paid to widening participation since the mid-1990s is hardly mentioned, nor is the impact of devolution since 1997 much more fully served, even though it is already leading to some striking divergences, and not only with respect to funding. The feeling persists that this is an account of an era that is rapidly passing, where what has happened will not be much of a guide to the future. Nevertheless, the book will be a useful resource for anyone keen to learn more about the evolution of higher education policy in the UK since the Second World War.

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