

Book review: *Green Unpleasant Land: Creative Responses to Rural England's Colonial Connections* by Professor Corinne Fowler

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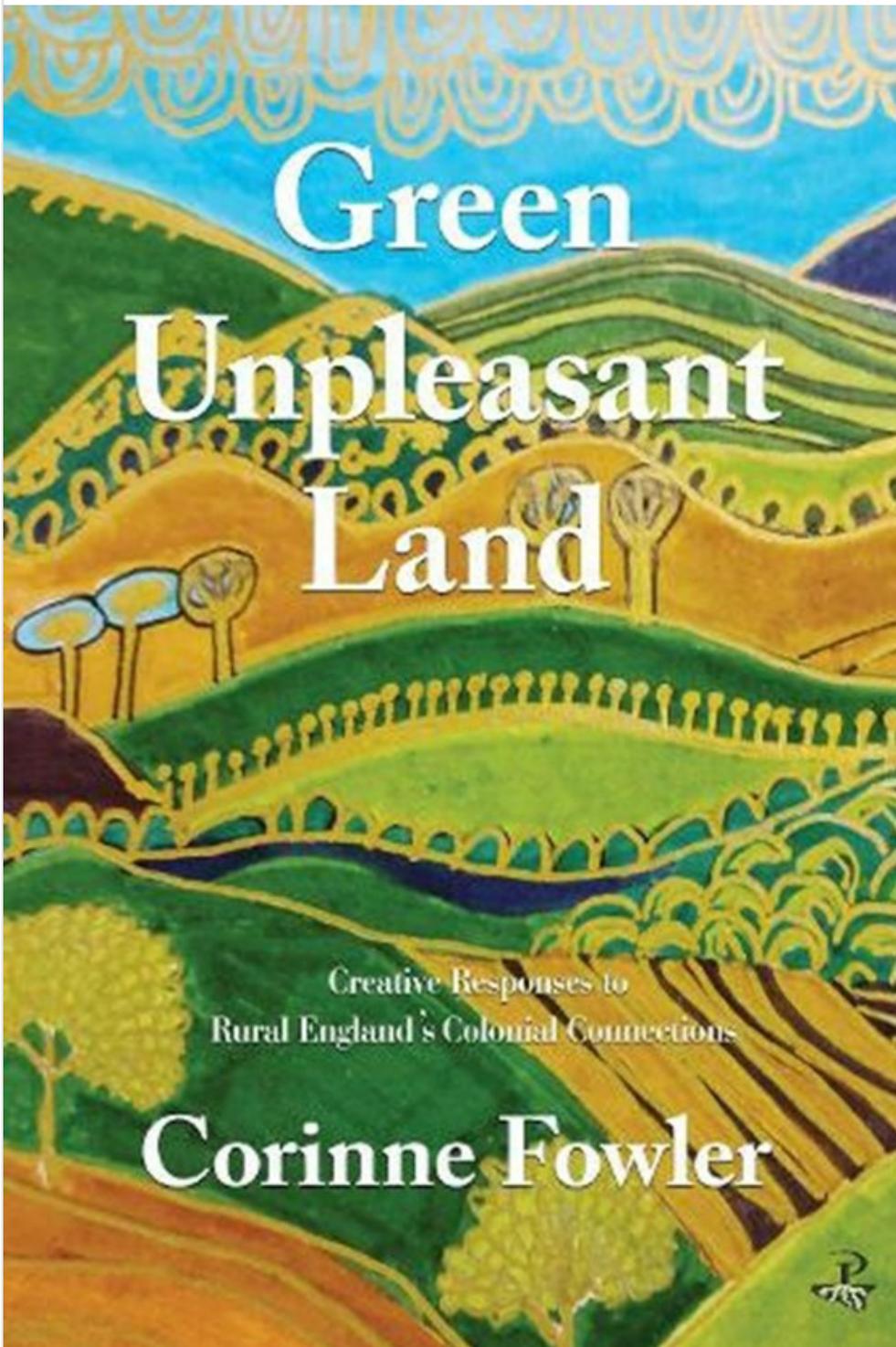
Green Unpleasant Land: Creative Responses to Rural England's Colonial Connections by Professor Corinne Fowler

On a freezing Bradford afternoon in January 1989, a thousand protestors came together with a common purpose. While the press looked on, they brought out a copy of a book mounted on a wooden pole, held it aloft and set it on fire. The book was *The Satanic Verses*, a magical realist novel by the British-American author Salman Rushdie, parts of which the Muslim protestors believed to be blasphemous. They wanted to bring attention to that fact and in this they were successful, possibly more than they could have imagined. Similar protests followed all around the world, some of which were violent. Exactly one month after the book burning in Bradford, the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, then Supreme Ruler of Iran, issued a public edict, or *fatwa*, calling for Rushdie's death, along with the killing of all those involved in the publication of the book. Rushdie went into hiding and spent many years living with police protection. Writing in *Vanity Fair* 20 years later, the British journalist and thinker Christopher Hitchens considered the *fatwa* against Salman Rushdie to be the opening shot of a cultural war on freedom of expression.

According to Hitchens, this too was successful. 'We live now,' he wrote, 'in a climate where every publisher and editor and politician has to weigh *in advance* the possibility of violent Muslim reprisal.'^[1] This culture war was not simply a metaphor. Hitoshi Igarashi, who had translated *The Satanic Verses* into Japanese, was actually killed, and other translators and publishers associated with the book were violently attacked and critically injured.

The Bradford book burning is mentioned in passing in *Green Unpleasant Land*, written by Professor Corinne Fowler and published by Peepal Tree Press in December 2020. It is a striking entry in the light of how Fowler's and others' research into the colonial histories of the British countryside have been received. The reaction of some conservative journalists and some Conservative MPs has been fevered. While none of them, thankfully, are following Khomeini's example and calling for Fowler's head, at least one has made it clear he wants this kind of work destroyed. In reaction to a Historic England report on the Transatlantic slave trade and its connection to heritage buildings, Conservative MP Sir John Hayes said, "I first thought it should be shelved, I now think it should be shredded".^[2] It is clear that Fowler and other researchers like her who write about the colonial contexts of Britain's heritage have committed the ultimate British blasphemy — they have taken the name of the British Empire in vain.

Figure 1



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Green Unpleasant Land: Creative Responses to Rural England's Colonial Connections by Professor Corinne Fowler, published by Peepal Tree Press

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Fowler's work has brought out into the open a previously unspoken but widely understood opinion that the purpose of the National Trust is to make Britain look good (the clue was in the name, after all). Up until relatively recently, this had not been a problem. From its inception, the National Trust has done an excellent job of presenting a very particular view of British history,

illustrated by the properties once owned by the nation's ruling and moneyed classes. In doing so, the National Trust developed an exceptionally strong brand. Its car parks are famous and its name evokes images of monumental country houses, elaborate gardens and family days out fuelled by cream teas. In that mode, it was well suited for a public audience that happily spent more time arguing over which should come first – the milk or the tea, the jam or the cream – than thinking about the history of exactly where the fancy porcelain, the tea or the sugar in the jam came from in the first place.

As a nation, though, our appetite for knowledge is changing. Historians like David Olusoga and Miranda Kauffman (who worked with Fowler on the Colonial Countryside project), have written books and presented TV documentaries focusing on Black Britons^[3], widening the historical frame to include the workings and legacies of Empire. This year, the journalist and writer Sathnam Sanghera found himself with a surprise bestseller on his hands in the form of his book *Empireland* (2021). Even television shows like the BBC's excellent sitcom *Ghosts* are feeding into the public consciousness the idea that if we are to understand Britain, we must understand the workings of the British Empire too.

Figure 2

The *Sunday Times* Bestseller 

Empireland

'A moving and
stimulating book
that deserves to
be widely read'

Guardian

'As urgent as it is
illuminating'

James O'Brien

'Excellent'

Andrew Marr,
Sunday Times

'I only wish this book
had been around
when I was at school'

Sadiq Khan



How Imperialism Has
Shaped Modern Britain

SATHNAM SANGHERA

© Penguin Books Ltd

Empireland: How Imperialism Has Shaped Modern Britain by Sathnam Sanghera,
published by Penguin Books Ltd

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Fowler presents an unequivocal view of British history, the result of a decade's worth of research. Divided into six parts, her book dissects the key aspects of the British – more particularly, the English – countryside. It tackles three main themes: colonial activities at home and abroad; connecting the British Empire to rural Britain; and writing back in the long Black and Asian presence in this nation, especially in literature. Fowler references key misconceptions in the British historical psyche, such as the common myth that slavery was not permitted on British soil (British colonies all over the world were themselves British soil – that is how colonialism works). She points out that country houses are indeed the jewels in the 'nation's heritage crown', in that, like the real crown jewels, their presence in this country is a direct result of British colonial exploitation. She explodes the idea that rural England – ancient, traditional, white – is the real England. Through a careful examination of the London 2012 London Olympics Opening Ceremony, Fowler lays bare the racist way in which the word 'urban' is often used as a euphemism for 'Black', and highlights the notion that places in the British Empire where non-white people lived were somehow not entirely British. By extension, when Black and brown people came to live and work in Britain, these limited notions of 'Englishness' underpinned the position that they did not belong here.

This book is a strong and excellent demonstration that not only were the Empire and the countryside connected in the past, they remain connected today, particularly through the ways in which we think about and interpret the countryside. Fowler extends her critique to the colonial contexts of science and heritage: to natural history museums, for example, with their taxidermy specimens modelled in a style suitable for displaying trophies from tiger and elephant hunting in the country house. Sir Hans Sloane gets name-checked, for his collecting of botanical specimens that provided the core for first the UK's British Museum and then the Natural History Museum collections, and for how he made his money ensuring the health, and therefore the labour value, of enslaved Africans on the Jamaican plantations where he worked as a physician. When you start to make these connections, it is easy to see the colonial frame imposed itself pretty much everywhere in heritage interpretation.

For Fowler, literature is an important primary source, and while this is obviously her specialist subject, there is not a single poet named that I did not encounter in my school English Language and Literature class. It goes to show how ingrained ideas of Englishness are in the literature we are taught, and by extension a particular kind of nativist white supremacy. People other than English people write in English, and Fowler's work redresses the balance of the white curriculum by focusing on Black and other non-white writers, most of whose names were familiar, but none of whose work (with the exception of the problematic V S Naipaul) I had ever actually read. I found myself strongly sympathising with Grace Nichols, the poet who grew up in Guyana before moving to Britain in the 1970s, whose work, on occasion, is a direct reaction to having Wordsworth's daffodils 'stuffed down one's throat' ([Nichols, 2020](#)). Fowler's dedicated focus on the work of Black and Asian writers and scholars makes this book an excellent starting point for anyone looking to diversify their reading lists or decolonise their curricula.

It is difficult to know whether or not any of Fowler's critics in the press or, worryingly, in Whitehall have actually read any of her writing because none of their counter-arguments reference any of its content. Part of the reason for that is probably because Fowler's position in the book is inarguable – of course country houses and rural landscapes in Britain were shaped by the nation's colonial history and economy because the last four centuries of British history have been shaped by the Empire. Fowler succeeds in puncturing the mirage that many, including the Trust, have been constructing over the last decades. The criticism she is facing is not about content, but about control. Speaking to the *New Yorker's* Sam Knight, Charles Moore, former editor of the *Daily Telegraph* and a vocal critic of the Trust's recent actions, said, 'I think comfort does matter... Why should I pay a hundred quid a year, or whatever, to be told what a shit I am?'^[4] Within Moore's words is the unspoken assumption that the purpose of the Trust is to serve him and people like him. That is to say, people who are happy for the Trust to continue as it has done, glorifying the British Empire (and the people who ran and grew rich from it) and underplaying the violence and tyranny that made it work, as if this were nothing more than the natural order of these things. Empire's gonna Empire, what can you do?

Fowler takes the position that we need more history, not less. These reinterpretations are not designed to shame Britain (albeit some of these histories, as with any nation, are shameful histories), but to tell the bigger story. The ways in which we talk about ourselves, about other people and our shared heritage – from the words we use to the stories we tell – they matter. For centuries, Black and brown people have been diminished, marginalised and excluded, have had their voices and contributions erased by these places. The idea that our histories and our feelings should take a back seat in the interests of a supposedly neutral interpretation of the past is simply a reiteration of old-school colonialism and racism. Our histories are here too, and this is what they look like. Our histories are built into the foundations of the fancy houses and gardens that arose out of and bear witness to what happened. There is so much they could tell us, if only we would let them speak.

Footnotes

1. <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2009/02/hitchens200902>
2. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-lincolnshire-56447347>
3. See, for example, David Olusoga's BBC series, *Black and British: A Forgotten History* (2016, re-aired 2020) and *Britain's Forgotten Slave Owners* (2021) (BBC iPlayer, retrieved September 2021) and Miranda Kaufmann's *Black Tudors: The Untold Story* (2017) Oneworld.
4. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/08/23/britains-idyllic-country-houses-reveal-a-darker-history>

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1. Nichols, G, 2020, *Passport to Here and There* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe)
2. Sanghera, S, 2021, *Empireland: How Imperialism Has Shaped Modern Britain* (London: Viking)

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Subhadra Das is a researcher and writer who looks at the relationship between science and society. She specialises in the history and philosophy of science, particularly the history of scientific racism and eugenics, and what those histories mean for our lives today. For nine years, she was Curator of the Science Collections at University College London, where she was also Researcher in Critical Eugenics at the Sarah Parker Remond Centre for the Study of Racism and Racialisation. She has written and presented podcasts, curated museum exhibitions, done stand-up comedy and regularly appears on radio and TV