Making Nineteenth-Century Literary Environments
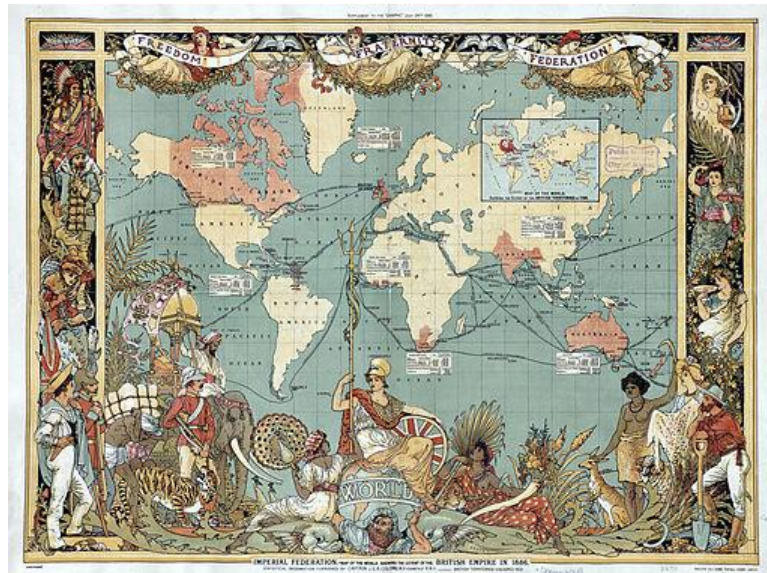
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The Project

Fig. 1 "Imperial Federation, Map of the World," showing the extent of the British Empire in 1886; areas under British control are highlighted in red. Wikimedia Commons.

"Nature never did betray/
The heart that loved her"
            William Wordsworth, *Tintern Abbey* (1798)

"Nature, red in tooth and claw/
...shriek'd against [God's] creed"
            Alfred Tennyson, *In Memoriam* (1850)

"By the plague-wind every breath of air you draw is polluted,
half round the world"

John Ruskin, "Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century" (1884)

This collection of essays is the culmination of the capstone project, *Making Nineteenth Century Literary Environments*, produced by a fourth-year English class at Simon Fraser University for Topics in Literature of the Long Nineteenth Century (Engl 435). The course examined nineteenth-century British writing about nature and the environment--exemplified in the changing attitudes captured in the quotations above--in the context of our present situation of global ecological crisis and climate change. Our aim was to consider current environmental problems in terms of processes that were set in motion, or intensified, in the nineteenth century, when extraordinary expansions of industrial technology and the worldwide web of communication forged ever tighter links between metropolitan and colonial spaces and places. (See the world map of British Empire above.) We explored some of the ways nineteenth-century writers already understood the idea of nature to be inextricable from culture. We reflected along with them on what nature, including human nature, is or may be. We engaged the period's forceful literary commentaries on industrialization and its consequences together with no less affecting indirect expressions of unspecified mourning and unaccountable loss. Most importantly, we asked why and how these formulations matter today.

The student essays in this collection are the outcome of complex and sustained engagement with literature, literary criticism, and theory. We began with a close examination of William Wordsworth's verse and prose in the Romantic tradition of nature writing and traced its fruition in the Victorian period, through the poetry of Alfred, Lord Tennyson, Matthew Arnold, and Christina Rossetti as well as the writings of John Ruskin, Anna Jameson, Olive Schreiner, and E. Pauline Johnson. Initially, our geographical focus was on local British regions, including the iconic English Lake District, with its centuries-long tradition of nature writing and tourism, as well as Charlotte Bronte's brooding Yorkshire Moors and William Morris's pastoral Thames River valley.

While we engaged regional imagined geographies with an awareness of global connections, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* underscored such links, with its

deep roots in colonial resource extraction, the Atlantic slave trade, and the complicity between the British Christian mission and Victorian Empire. In the final weeks of the course, we read colonial travel writing and fiction set in Canada and South Africa to consider ways in which both space and place are primary sites of environmental and postcolonial recuperation, sustainability, and hope.

Our literary studies were framed by a range of theoretical writings on environmentalism and climate change as well as Victorian and postcolonial criticism, including Donna Haraway, Timothy Morton, Jason W. Moore, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Jane Bennett, Ursula Heise, Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George B. Handley, Elaine Freedgood and Jesse Oak Taylor. In addition, one class was held in SFU Library Special Collections for hands-on study of the William Morris Collection with renowned Morris expert Elizabeth C. Miller; as part of the workshop we considered the relationship between constructions of nature and Victorian ecologies of print. Another class featured eco-poet, activist, and SFU professor Steven Collis reading from his Wordsworth-inspired *Once in Blockadia* (2016).

The Process

Fig. 2 "The Process," Wikimedia Commons.

The word "essay" is derived from the French verb "essayer," which means to attempt or try (OED). In the era of the 140-character tweet, the blog post, the online exhibit, and the rapid-fire social text, the slow, traditional essay may seem stale if not downright moribund. Yet like the étude for the aspiring musician or

the drill for the athlete, the essay form offers literature students a space for intensive, concentrated, and difficult thinking about, and through, writing. The essay form therefore functions as a laboratory and gymnasium for the mind, where those with the desire to learn may practice, test, and experiment with ideas and expression. *Making Nineteenth Century Literary Environments* is a showcase of such thinking and communication as process, activity, and energetic exercise.

Collectively and individually, the student essays represent a thoughtful and original endeavour. Each student is a contributing editor, peer reviewer, and author for the project. Throughout the semester, the essays underwent several stages of drafting, editing, and revision. The students developed the interpretive framework for their essays through ongoing weekly posts to the class blog on the assigned readings and in class discussions. In addition, they deepened their thinking working together in groups for oral presentations as well as through additional independent research.

The final stages of peer-review, revision, editing, and cataloguing were managed through the open source software platform, Open Monograph Press (OMP), developed by the SFU Library's Public Knowledge Project (PKP). Final production and publication is with the PKP's journal management and publishing system, Open Journal System (PKP).

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For further information about PKP and its software and publishing systems, contact Kevin Stranack, Head of Digital Publishing & Associate Director for Community Engagement and Learning at the Public Knowledge Project, Simon Fraser University Library, kstranac@sfu.ca

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