

European – New World Encounters

European Encounters with the New World: From Renaissance to Romanticism by Anthony Pagden. ISBN 0 300 05285 5. Yale University Press. £18.95.

THE 'DISCOVERY' OF THE NEW WORLD IN 1492 is essential to the self-image of Europeans and of their creole heirs in the Americas. For most of those creoles 1492 marks the beginning of their history or, at least, the datable origin of an identity which was grafted upon the longer histories of the native peoples whom the Europeans slaughtered, drove out or absorbed into their own cultures and communities. For Europe, since at least the seventeenth century, the encounter with the Americas has also marked the beginning of modernity. As theorists as disparate as David Hume and Karl Marx agreed, 1492 marked an epoch of expansion in scientific and intellectual understanding as well as economic globalisation and the rise of the west. Such an attitude has attracted attention of late as what Derrida has called a 'white mythology', a timely concern as the west has embarked on a post-imperial age which is also (and not coincidentally) conceived as post-modern. To leave colonialism behind, in this conception, is therefore to abandon modernity itself, and that knowledge makes study of the imperial theme all the more urgent.

'We are at a point when we can no longer ignore empires and the imperial context in our studies', Edward Said has remarked in his recent book, *Culture and Imperialism*, though neither literary critics nor historians need to be reminded of the importance of the imperial theme. Historians in particular have taken a more chronologically expansive and analytically precise approach to empire than Said, who confines himself to studying the high culture of Britain, France, America and their former colonies in the period after the French Revolution, and so consciously leaves out the earlier Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, French and British empires. Yet what the early-modern imperial experience meant to these cultures is an unignorable historical question which lies at the heart of the west's perceptions of itself, of history, and of human development.

So far there has been no theoretically informed and historically-grounded account of what the New World meant to the Old in the early-modern period. Not, that is, until Anthony Pagden's *European Encounters with the New World*. This is not to say that the problem has not been tackled before: John Elliott's classic book of 1970, *The Old World and the New 1492–1650*, and the many studies it inspired, are evidence of the salience of the question, as is the flood of books and articles generated by the Columbian Quincentenary in 1992. Yet by treating the question as one of the 'impact' of America, or the 'assimilation' of its novelty, historians have missed some of the most far-reaching implications of the European reception of the New World. One of the strengths of Pagden's book is that he is reflexive about what is at stake in such ways of framing the question. He shows how a view of the encounter as an irreversible, epochal impact was generated, and how far the notion of assimilation was perpetually hedged by the more resilient apprehension that all human cultures are incommensurable and thus that all testimony of otherness is inescapably personal and ultimately incommunicable.

The twin problems of cultural commensurability and the communicability of otherness are central to Pagden's account of the reception of the New World by travellers, philosophers, ethnographers and historians from Christopher Columbus to Alexander von Humboldt. Though historians and scientists from the sixteenth century have linked America with printing and the compass, for example, as some of the inventions which marked Europe's passage into modernity, the New World was not invented in 1492: it pre-existed its revelation to European eyes. Yet those eyes saw their world through the spectacles of a particularly circumscribed group of canonical texts, both Biblical and classical, which contained no hard evidence of new continents in the west. Columbus remains the classic example of a late-medieval explorer who felt he had confirmed the findings of that canon: a little massaging of distances aside, all of the islands which he encountered were exactly where they should be in Asia, as was the earthly paradise which he felt he was closely approaching on his third voyage in 1498. Less easily accommodated were the practices of the native peoples. They could only be understood if they were redescribed in terms recognisable to Europeans by what Pagden calls the 'principle of attachment', which at once assimilated them to alien categories and deprived them of any meaning for their actors. The failure to see the native peoples in their own terms left them vulnerable to European assessments of their capacity for civilisation, their cultural autonomy and even their humanity. When no effort could be made to overcome alienness, such incommensurability became the excuse for dispossession.

Yet there were those, from the first half of the sixteenth century onwards, who denied that different cultural practices were evidence that there could be no common humanity between conqueror and conquered. The efforts of Bartolomé de Las Casas to communicate the sheer scale of the slaughter of native peoples, and his pleas on behalf of their humanity in the teeth of mighty opposition, form the most heartening part of Pagden's subtly tragic story of the results of unavoidable misunderstanding. To assert that the native Americans possessed the same rights as the Spanish demanded a massive effort of persuasion which rested on the authority of Las Casas's testimony as much as on his ability to prove a fit between natural law and the facts of the natives' humanity. This was a central problem in a culture sparing with its grants of authority to novel testimony, and also explains the eager insistence of so many travellers to the New World that their reports are 'Briefe and True' (Thomas Harriot), a 'Verdadera Historia' (Bernal Díaz) or a 'Wahrhaftige Historia' (Hans Staden). It was also the central concern of perhaps the most notable early-modern philosophical reflection on the New World, Montaigne's 'Des Cannibales', in which the fallible opinions of the learned are placed against the unvarnished testimony of Montaigne's servant who has been to the New World, as well as the documents, the artefacts and the authority of the Tupinamba of Brazil themselves. Montaigne's balanced conclusion nevertheless wryly affirmed the irreducibility of cultural difference: 'Tout cela ne va pas trop mal: mais quoy, ils ne portent point de haut de chausses'.

The challenge to established authority, and the peculiar value placed on personal testimony, encouraged scepticism but not therefore a full-blown and critical relativism. However permeable received authority may ultimately have been to the novelty of the Americas, the theoretical structures within which that challenge was framed ensured that only European voices would ever be heeded. Indeed, the construction of the history of language itself contributed to the silencing of the native peoples. As Pagden shows, eighteenth-century theories of language formed part of the Enlightenment's larger enterprise of conjectural history, which charted humanity's progress from savagism to civility. Just as societies moved from agricultural simplicity to commercial complexity, it was argued, so languages – impelled by the needs of each stage in human development – became increasingly rich in abstractions and generalities. The Huron Adario in the *Dialogues* of the Baron de Lahontan could protest that the native 'goes to the land of his fathers with more tranquillity than many word-learned sceptics', but as the figure in a European fiction – like Montesquieu's Persian or Diderot's Tahitian – he was the teasing creation of a self-consciously literate and argumentative culture, not an

autonomous spokesman whose words could ever be transparently relayed. The native who comes to speak in terms intelligible to the colonisers is caught in a similar trap: having learnt their language, the only profit will be the ability to curse the loss of cultural individuality.

The Enlightenment gave no hope that alien cultures could ever be understood on their own terms unless the observer 'went native' or the Other became domesticated. In both cases, the alternative to incommensurability was absorption. Diderot saw a midway stage between savagism and civility as the only hope: cultural contact would expand Europe's moral horizons, while the native peoples would have the benefit of superior technologies. Herder, meanwhile, denied any possibility of a common humanity because expansion and contact eroded the features of cultural particularity which dictated the natural homes and social trajectories of each society. Neither of these visions was either cheering or even practical. Both Edward Gibbon and Adam Smith (neither of whom figures in Pagden's story) presented a more clear-eyed view which praised the benefits of commerce in bringing peoples together, while warning of the dangers of colonialism. Even that view no longer seems sufficient: Gibbon's and Smith's warnings went unheeded, and the market has perhaps done more to divide the world economically than to unite it morally, despite their hopes. It is the great virtue of Pagden's courageous and highly original book that by presenting the historical alternatives so even-handedly, he can give no easy or uplifting recommendations for our own cultural predicaments. But by revealing their genesis in European encounters with the New World, he has immeasurably helped us to understand the Enlightenment origins of our own despairs.

David Armitage

The New Sons and Lovers

Sons and Lovers by D. H. Lawrence. Edited by Helen Baron and Carl Baron. ISBN 0 521 24276 1 (hb.); 0 521 43221 9 (pb.). Cambridge University Press. £73 (hb.); £14.95 (pb.).

D. H. Lawrence: Sons and Lovers by Michael Black. ISBN 0521 36924 X. Cambridge University Press. £6.95.

D. H. LAWRENCE ONCE RECALLED William Heinemann saying that *Sons and Lovers* was the 'dirtiest' book he had ever read. He was obviously referring