



Insatiable appetites: imperial encounters with cannibals in the North Atlantic world, by Kelly L. Watson

Peter Rushton

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BOOK REVIEW

Insatiable appetites: imperial encounters with cannibals in the North Atlantic world, by Kelly L. Watson, New York & London, New York University Press, 2015, xiv + 239 pp., \$40.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-8147-6347-6

This book addresses the way that Europeans travelled to the Americas carrying the assumptions derived from classical authors that barbarians were likely to be cannibals or Amazons. They sought and found these categories among those they encountered, recognising them in local native societies, first in the Caribbean and then the Americas. Cannibals (the very word seemingly derived from Carib) constituted the colonial “other” for many Europeans. Although the author acknowledges the extent of anthropological debate and fieldwork that followed William Arens’ blank denial of the existence of cannibalism, it is not her purpose to explore the issue of myth and reality with regard to the accounts of colonial observers. Despite the fact that both historical accounts and modern fieldwork have established patterns of cannibalism in some American native cultures, this study concentrates on the different purposes to which accounts of these practices were put in the Spanish, French and British empires before 1800. Kelly Watson promises a new interpretation of this process in that she places at the centre of the colonial discourses the gendered character of both the imagery and the narratives of cannibals and cannibalism. Stories of peoples who captured young men, castrated and then reared them to be eaten later, were accompanied by accounts of islands of women who would invite chosen cannibals to father their children. Here, the myths of the cannibal Scythians and the one-breasted Amazons found in Herodotus were replicated in reports from across the Atlantic. Beginning from the first encounters in the Caribbean, the study moves to the Meso-American experiences, the French Jesuit accounts of Canada and North America, and England’s northern colonies. All this is well done, with the different perspectives of Spanish *conquistadors*, French Jesuit missionaries, and the more disparate and thin accounts by British settlers, captured in war or engaged in ethnic cleansing of native peoples, contrasted.

Watson’s promise to deliver a gendered analysis of these discourses stresses the mixture of masculinity and racism in some of these accounts. White men were struck with self-doubt and fears (almost Freudian fears of castration, real and symbolic). They were afraid of being unmanned by both sexually insatiable women and castrating cannibals – a double impotence: this was a fear of western *weakness* rather than an assertion of superiority. Even if they could withstand torture, they could still be corrupted, as Joseph Conrad’s Kurtz was, by savages they could not resist, unable to reject the *heart of darkness* of the Other in themselves. This seems to be the core particularly of Amerigo Vespucci’s fascination with native Americans and of some Jesuit accounts. What emerges most strongly is the sexual obsessions of the conquerors. In the Spanish narratives in particular, allegations of cannibalism were compounded by sodomy and mass human sacrifice – and all justified conquest and conversion. But native women remained a constant focus of fascination. “Through the bodies of women the conquistadors negotiated their understanding of both sexuality and cannibalism.”

There were great differences in the extent to which accounts were based on real knowledge of local cultures. The Jesuits took native beliefs more seriously, and were more sympathetic to native sufferings that arose from European contact and conquest. They accepted the sincerity of native belief, adopting what Watson calls a partly pragmatic “proto-cultural relativism”, even incorporating some of the local practices into their own, but drew the line at torture,

sacrifice and cannibalism. Though the 70 volumes of the *Jesuit Relations* report on cannibalism on 130 occasions, says Watson, it was not a dominant concern – they reported on flora and fauna, for example, far more. They also took sides, sympathising with the Huron whose starvation cannibalism derived from aggression by the Iroquois, they thought. Both peoples, however, consumed war captives. Iroquois warfare at the urging of the women meant that war was fought by men “to prove their bravery but also to reaffirm female power in the village”. For the Jesuits, stories of their own members’ courage in incidents such as the martyrdom of Jean de Brébeuf and Gabriel Lalemant reaffirmed their manhood as well as their faith, and provided propaganda that had a great impact in Europe. “Through their torture, sacrifice and cannibalization the Jesuits proved that even as celibate clergy, they could still compete as men.” Despite her stated intention Kelly Watson does accept the probable character of cannibalism among the peoples of north-east America, particularly “exocannibalism”, the eating of captives both by warriors immediately after battles and subsequently by whole villages when the warriors returned with their victims.

The discussion of the English experience and imagery is more cursory, partly because there were fewer references to cannibalism before the Seven Years’ War when they accused both French and Indians of the offence. English captivity narratives stress redemption through resistance to the temptations of savagery (and few claimed to have witnessed actual cannibalism, it seems). With few accounts emphasising the phenomenon, the author concludes that cannibalism was a hindrance not a catalyst of English expansion, though it had its place in shaping the unique form of frontier masculinity and sense of superiority.

In a brief conclusion, Watson agrees with historians such as Dror Wahrman that the writers of these colonial accounts did not think of race in the modern sense, though skin colour mattered as a key marker of difference. In the early period the discourses of Indian savagery and cannibalism served slightly different purposes for each of the colonising nations, though all were used to support a sense of European superiority and right to rule. The self-imposed restriction by the author leaves the vexed question of the extent of native American cannibalism unanswered, but within that framework she produces a very thorough and readable comparative study of European discourse on the natives of the Caribbean and the Americas.

Peter Rushton

University of Sunderland

 peter.rushton@sunderland.ac.uk

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