Ten Books That Shaped the British Empire
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Ten Books That Shaped the British Empire: Creating an Imperial Commons.

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Charlotte Brontë received her first six author’s copies of *Jane Eyre* on 19 October 1847. From Haworth, Yorkshire, she wrote to her London publishers acknowledging the volumes she now held in her hand: “You have given the work every advantage which good paper, clear type and a seemly outside can supply—if it fails—the fault will lie with the author—you are exempt. I now await the judgment of the press and the public.”¹ Far from failing, *Jane Eyre* was an instant success.² From its sensational debut as the first novel of the unknown “Currer Bell,” *Jane Eyre* has remained in print, attracting critical acclaim and a lasting popularity with readers. The foundational coming-of-age tale (bildungsroman), the enduring women’s emancipation text, *Jane Eyre* sits securely in the cultural canon. Simply to note a world before *Jane Eyre* existed in the hands, minds, and hearts of readers is to point to a vital transformation, a watershed in modern history.

By April 1848 *Jane Eyre* was into its third London edition. A first American edition appeared early in the same year. Smith, Elder paid Brontë £500 for the work and rights to a second novel; her first manuscript, “The Professor,” they had rejected. Unlike Macaulay’s *History of England* (1848), which Catherine Hall discusses as another publishing hit of the decade, *Jane Eyre*
did not drop from view but has continued to attract fans.³ “Victorian fiction” continues to be avidly consumed in the early twenty-first century, a phenomenon noted by John Sutherland and Antoinette Burton, among others.³ Jane Eyre is unambiguously a charismatic work. Yet it is also an emblematic product of its mid-nineteenth-century making. What is it about Charlotte Brontë’s narrator-protagonist, the small, put upon but rebellious ten-year-old child turned eighteen-year-old plain, passionate yet outspoken governess, that endures in the global imagination? In the hands of readers across the imperial commons, Jane Eyre has variously been a creature of empire, has taken aim at the foundations of power, and has become a target of empire “writing back.” In her influential 1985 essay Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak set out an agenda linking nineteenth-century literature with the “social mission” of imperialism, feminist individualism, and that imperialist legacy, and a connection between Brontë’s 1847 classic and Jean Rhys’s 1966 Wide Sargasso Sea.⁵ Here that agenda is pursued through a focus on the books as links in chains: chains that connect author to reader, buyer to seller, borrower to lender, and readers across time and space. Spivak’s argument drew attention to the bondage underlying Jane’s freedom; the ongoing life of both original and countertext testify to the entangled narration of empire and emancipation.

Jane Eyre is one of the archetypal spines of the British empire. In this discussion it is Jane Eyre as a material object, an agent within the communicative assemblage of empire, that is to the fore rather than Jane Eyre as a singular literary text. Mobile, portable, and talismanic, the book moved rapidly along circulation routes, finding paths through plural print cultures and divergent readerships. It tracked along colonial, metropolitan, commercial, recreational, and pedagogical capillaries, becoming a book in the hands (and minds) of many. Among them were readers in London and colonial Wellington in the 1840s–1850s, in the Antarctic in 1901, and in southern Africa in the 1940–1950s. As a defiant tale, Jane’s narration of her own triumphant self-formation has pressed its claims on readers in intimate yet powerful form. In the pages of Jane Eyre lies the promise of an independent inner life. The potent sovereignty Jane achieves, and exemplifies, rests on relations of empire. Exposing those foundations in the later twentieth century served to reconfigure the imperial commons, with challengers writing back to Brontë’s original. In Wide Sargasso Sea (1966), Jean Rhys’s character Antoinette Cosway willfully burns down Thornfield Hall. Rhys repossesses rather than repudiates Brontë’s story, reimagining Bertha Mason as Cosway.
and the Caribbean world from which she hails before entering the pages of *Jane Eyre*. More than this, Rhys takes aim at the paper underpinnings of imperial authority, dispatching the “manly spines” of bound volumes to destruction by vermin. The discussion falls into three sections: a consideration of *Jane Eyre*’s initial circulation routes and readers in the late 1840s–1850s; *Jane Eyre* as text of defiance and its promise of sovereignty of the gendered self; Jean Rhys’s writing back through the *Wide Sargasso Sea* and her challenge to the spines of empire and “good reading.”6

*A Book in the Hand*

Within months of *Jane Eyre*’s London publication in October 1847, the book was being read across England, and around the globe. As a commodity for sale it was carried along the market routes linking publisher’s warehouse to book buyers. But it was also wordy traffic surrounding the book—gossip and speculation—that fired the arteries of circulation. *Jane Eyre*’s originality, and the mystery of its then unknown creator, “Currer Bell”—man or woman, one or several, “autobiography” or fiction—heightened the book’s sensational debut. The original title page presented the work as *Jane Eyre. An Autobiography*, edited by Currer Bell. There was, thus, camouflage of title and pseudonym in the “seemly outside” of hard covers. The second edition’s dedication to William Thackeray inflamed rumors that the author was the great writer’s spurned mistress. As Mrs. Gaskell was soon to record, “smooth and polished” Londoners accustomed to “spending their time in nothing but” telling or hearing “some new thing” were among those at the forefront of conjecture over the book’s authorship; it was gossip that “ran about like wild-fire.”7 Only nine months after *Jane Eyre*’s publication did Brontë’s own publishers know, for sure, the identity of their author. Books and their makers were hot property, events in themselves, as much as the stories they told.8

Such sensation is not surprising given the very rapid expansion in the book and printing industry that was in full flood by the 1840s. Large sums of money were at stake in a highly competitive market. Alexis Weedon estimates that the “potential market for print in England and Wales” alone quadrupled between 1830 and 1901. By the 1850s an annual production of over five thousand titles (in increasingly long print runs) hugely surpassed the output of just a few decades earlier, while double that number of titles was being published by 1909. A mass reading public came into existence.9 A
particular feature of the British book industry was its capacity to tap large overseas markets through its imperial reach, and an even wider diaspora of English-language readers. By 1848 the total value of books exported to Britain’s colonial possessions stood at £90,086, a threefold increase from 1828. In the single decade to 1858 it reached £273,281, and by the end of the century £1,088,940. By the late 1840s, the shift from India as the major market to Australasia was well advanced. Five times the quantity of books passing through Indian ports were reaching their Australasian equivalents by the early 1850s. White settler colonialism provided a lucrative and geographically dispersed market for a British trade in book and print. A highly popular title such as *Jane Eyre* was a valuable commodity, expanding the market by extending the pool of readers, and regular readers, across boundaries of age, gender, and education. Smith, Elder’s history illustrated the rapid growth and adaptation of the trade. Established in 1816 as a company to trade in publishing and as East India agents, by the mid-1840s the company was thriving in the hands of the second generation. The East India agency was only split off as a separate business in 1868.

Books were beneficiaries, and agents, of the accelerating mobility of the mid-nineteenth century. Evidence of books literally “on the move” is abundant. If faster and more reliable shipping routes underpinned overseas trade and the development of colonial markets, it was the railways that opened up domestic markets and signaled the modernity of the 1840s. Within a year of *Jane Eyre*’s publication W. H. Smith had opened the first railway bookstall at London’s Euston Station. Reading on the train, and while waiting for trains, became part of the world moving to the rhythm of the rail timetable rather than the stagecoach.

News of *Jane Eyre*, and copies of the book, also spread across the world through the massive quantum of envelopes and packets sent by friends and relatives in private correspondence and goods exchange. Glimpses of specific readers of *Jane Eyre* provide a view of the book as words in motion, evidence of the book as a dispersing event. Mary Taylor, Charlotte Brontë’s school friend and fellow Yorkshirewoman (now living in New Zealand), read *Jane Eyre* in May 1848. Taylor received her copy through the post and shipping system that linked Smith, Elder’s offices at 65 Cornhill, London, with the newly named Port Nicholson at Wellington, New Zealand. While it took around five months to reach her, Taylor was almost certainly the first person to read *Jane Eyre* knowing precisely the identity of its author. “After I read it,” Mary wrote to Charlotte, “I went to the top of Mt. Victoria and
looked for a ship to carry a letter to you. There was a little thing with one mast, and also H.M.S. *Fly*, and nothing else."¹⁴ The letter she did send, not by that ship but by a later one, contains a wonderful response by one of Charlotte Brontë’s most astute and, in the first year of the book’s life, most geographically distant readers.¹⁵ The significance of this correspondence has been discussed elsewhere in relation to the intimacy of friendship across imperial space.

Even by the time of this first letter to Charlotte Brontë, a month or so after she had read *Jane Eyre*, Taylor had lent it “a good deal.” Informal borrowing was an important mode of secondary circulation. Taylor reported disdainfully to Brontë that these readers told her that *Jane Eyre* made them cry. But they gave no “opinion” of the book; if one ever did, Taylor promised Charlotte she would “embalm it for you.”¹⁶ Eager as Taylor’s neighbors were to read the latest book, it was sentiment rather than passion, outrage, or critique that *Jane Eyre* produced among these colonial readers. Mary Taylor was characteristically astringent about the shortage of cultural capital in her immediate milieu. The presence of good books was not sufficient, in itself, to provide her with intellectual companions. But it was with the purpose of increasing her financial capital—and thereby her economic and social independence (freedom from governessing or marriage as options for middle-class women in England)—that Taylor had taken up colonial life. While Brontë created an imaginary world in which her character Jane Eyre overcame these limits to female autonomy, her friend had taken up life in a Wakefieldian settlement as a practical experiment to the same end. The Wellington in which Mary Taylor read *Jane Eyre* was less than ten years old: a raw, straggling, quarrelsome realization of what Edward Gibbon Wakefield had imagined of “systematic colonisation” in his *Letter from Sydney* (discussed in chapter 1). Already blood had been spilled in resistance to the British presence. Arthur Wakefield, Edward Gibbon’s brother, was one of twenty-six Maori and European people who died in June 1843 in a conflict over land.

Just as new reading matter was prized in colonial Wellington, so too was it something to remark on in correspondence among the “reading classes” of London and its environs. At her home in Wimbledon, twenty-three-year-old Jane Maria Richmond read *Jane Eyre* one Saturday in May 1848 with her close friend Margaret Taylor. Soon after, her friend having returned to her home in the German spa town of Wiesbaden, Jane Maria recalled fondly the day in which they had “wickedly devoured ‘Jane Eyre’ in bed.”¹⁷ Corre-
spondence between the two friends subsequently incorporated the imaginary world *Jane Eyre* had conjured up. Writing to Margaret in January 1850 Jane Maria referred to one of her former admirers, but one of whom her family did not approve, as “My French Mr Rochester.”

For a reading family such as the Richmonds, the years around 1846–1851 brought a wealth of new works. *Jane Eyre* appeared at what can be seen as a particularly productive spike in nineteenth-century publishing; a defining expansion of the textual commons and one that would contribute to the elevation of books to a higher station in the world of print culture. In the same year in which *Jane Eyre* appeared, William Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair* was first published (in monthly parts from 1 January 1847). *Pendennis* followed in 1849–1850. The year 1848 brought to bookstands Macaulay’s *History of England* (vols. 1–2); Mrs. Gaskell’s first novel, *Mary Barton*; Charles Dickens’s *Dombey and Son* (1846–1848); Charles Kingsley’s *Yeast*; and Trollope’s early work *The Kellys and O’Kellys*. Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* (1847) and Anne Brontë’s *Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) were also part of this outpouring. Charlotte Brontë’s two subsequent novels, *Shirley* and *Villette*, appeared in 1849 and 1851, respectively.

The Richmond household’s reading diet over the two years surrounding *Jane Eyre*’s publication provides a glimpse into a middle-class ecology of print. In March 1849 Jane Maria promised herself “some pleasure in reading Macaulay’s ‘History,’” impressed by “how people have been and are devouring it,” and that Mudie (the largest circulating library) was supplied with one hundred copies. Her older brother William got the work from there. A couple of weeks later she told her friend Margie: “We like Macaulay very much, but get on slowly, as old James [in fact her younger brother] chooses to read it aloud to us, and we often have interruptions that prevent our all three assembling. It is certainly the lightest history I ever read, one gets along as glibly as with a novel, and it is very interesting; quite a Young Ladies’ history in ease and cleanness; it leaves nothing for the poor female intellect to do; all the ideas are made smooth and easy of comprehension even to my rusty brain, and I believe I should stand a questioning on it better than on Godwin.” They were also reading Frederika Bremer’s *Midnight Sun* (“weak stuff”), Newman’s *Nemesis of Faith*, Longfellow’s *Hyperion*, and work by Carlyle, and were looking forward to *Mary Barton*, which their friends, the Huttons, and others, “rave about.”

The pathways forged by *Jane Eyre* can be traced through reports of how readers described its press on their bodies and intimate routines. People
complained about what the book did to them. George Smith was brought the manuscript on a Saturday by his colleague, W. S. Williams, with the suggestion that he read it at the earliest opportunity. In his memoir Smith recalled, ‘After breakfast on Sunday morning I took the ms. of ‘Jane Eyre’ to my little study, and began to read it. The story quickly took me captive. Before twelve o’clock my horse came to the door, but I could not put the book down. . . . Presently the servant came to tell me that luncheon was ready; I asked him to bring me a sandwich and a glass of wine, and still went on with ‘Jane Eyre’. . . . Before I went to bed that night I had finished reading the manuscript.”21 In reply to the person who had sent him a copy, Thackeray wrote: “I wish you had not sent me ‘Jane Eyre’. . . . It interested me so much that I have lost (or won if you like) a whole day in reading it. . . . Some of the love passages made me cry, to the astonishment of John who came in with the coals.”22 The skeptical reviewer of the book’s third edition, William George Clark, set out his encounter with the novel to readers of Fraser’s: “We took up Jane Eyre one winter’s evening, somewhat piqued at the extravagant commendations we had heard, and sternly resolved to be as critical as Croker. But as we read on we forgot both commendations and criticism, identified ourselves with Jane in all her troubles, and finally married Mr. Rochester about four in the morning.”23 These readers were careful to record their reading in forms that could easily be produced as evidence if called to testify in court. Smith’s manservant, Thackeray’s “John” are witnesses to strange behavior, witnesses who could be trusted to think of uses for paper other than reading (wrapping rubbish, wiping clean, or setting a fire).

The tempo of reading, and the disembodied state in which readers forgot both themselves and the material object they held in their hands, distinguished the book and book readers in the imperial commons. Reading continuously, and pleasurably, from beginning to end, cover to cover, was a measure of worth. It was these features that denoted quality content from dross, good readers from poor skimmers, lasting impact from ephemerality. Reading as “possession” put time in the hands of those with books. To own property in books, or to have proprietary borrowing rights from Mudie’s, was to be in the temporal space of the future—a future of confidence. The book that could command its reader in these ways spoke to the power that was imbued in the well-ordered page. The “possessed” book was also one in which owners held the world in their hands. In the case of the bildungsroman, that world was one of the autonomous self. Reader, narrator, and

56 • charlotte macdonald
author became one between the covers, creating a powerful motor force for the book as an agent. In the hands of readers, *Jane Eyre*’s impress was on individual hearts and minds. Readers describe the book’s consumption, books being devoured, literally taken into themselves.

*Jane Eyre* contributed a particular spatial imagining to the wider 1840s–1850s appetite for stories of Englishness. Whether it was Dickens’s extraordinarily popular tales of teeming contemporary London, Macaulay’s *History of England*, or Brontë’s story of a Yorkshire governess, the era of empire fed an appetite for tales of England. As Catherine Hall tells us, Macaulay’s *History* provided a narrative of English success as the basis for western and white expansion. Firmly set in the remote provincial surrounds of a thinly veiled Yorkshire, Jane’s fate was directly linked to events in the distant spaces of Britain’s empire: the declining fortunes of the plantation Caribbean and the rising fortunes of India. In *Jane Eyre* the setting of an era just passed—of province, stagecoach, country property—provided a reassuring and confirming story of England at a moment of early nineteenth-century modernity. Readers inhabited a time beyond their own, one layered with meaning that linked a particular historical setting with the protagonist’s success. Ruth Livesey has described this as a vision of the “Tory nation.”24 Jed Esty designates both *Jane Eyre* and *David Copperfield* as tales of “national historical time,” their heroes underscoring the triumph of national culture. In these two canonical forms of the high Victorian bildungsroman, Esty notes “the protagonist’s maturity interlocks with the reconsolidation of the national boundaries.” *Jane Eyre* deals with empire, but ultimately the plot must banish these non-English, colonial elements in order to “pave the way for the ultimate insertion of Jane into a stabilized and socially sanctioned English container at Thornfield Hall.”25

**A Defiant Text: Sovereignty on the Small Scale**

*Jane Eyre* proved to be an unusually defiant work. Long outliving its creator, and the mid-nineteenth century in which it first appeared, *Jane Eyre* continued to find its way into the hands of readers. Charlotte Brontë’s death in 1855, aged thirty-nine, fed the expanding “Brontë legend,” which almost immediately memorialized the author in book form with Mrs. Gaskell’s *Life of Charlotte Bronte* (1857).26 Defying the forces that rendered other print works obsolete, *Jane Eyre* continued to travel along circulation routes of global print capitalism as a commodity for sale, as an item in private
collections and public libraries, as a work read, discussed, recommended, and remarked on well into the twentieth century. The book became part of the cultural bloodstream. Robert Falcon Scott’s expedition to Antarctica in 1901 set off with a travel library in which *Jane Eyre* was one of the carefully selected volumes. But it was the passionate, triumphant character of Jane that also gave the book its quality of defiance. Jane’s passionate speaking out against injustice, as a governess to a master, subordinate to superior, galvanized its forcefulness. Sovereignty on the small scale, Jane’s story of selfhood achieved against the odds, produced a remarkably long life in the global imagination.

Among the many places *Jane Eyre* can be traced in the twentieth century is in the schoolrooms of southern Africa. As a set text in the curriculum for matriculation students *Jane Eyre* had congealed in what might be termed the pedagogical commons. In this form the book was part of a wider colonial legacy in institutions of church and education, in the libraries and literacy associations of paper and print that lived alongside, and often outlasted, formal relations of empire. (C. L. R. James described a similar pattern in his education in Trinidad.) For “Lily Moya,” Mabel Palmer, and “Tambu,” readers of *Jane Eyre* in southern Africa in the mid-twentieth century, the book was a medium of gendered colonial formation. It signified differently for each of these women.

*Jane Eyre* was one of the books requested by fifteen-year-old “Lily Moya” (a pseudonym) writing from the Transkei in 1949 to seventy-four-year-old Mabel Palmer, the Fabian socialist and feminist head of the Non-European section of the University of Natal in Durban. Moya, a young Xhosa woman, was desperate to continue her schooling. Without passing the matriculation exams she could not continue her studies, and without the books she could not prepare for the exams. Listing the books she needed, Lily Moya also asked Palmer to send her “their summaries” (published study guides), while also indicating that she would “tell you the other books later, which I would like to read for pleasure.” Palmer sent her a copy of *Jane Eyre* along with Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, James Barry’s *Admirable Crichton*, and several other works. As Shula Marks notes in her history of the correspondence between the two women, neither Moya nor Palmer commented on the suitability of what was the standard curriculum set for the Cape Senior Certificate across all schools, black and white, rural and urban. A common commitment to education was a bridging ground for a small, largely
mission-educated African elite and the progressive section of white society in the deeply divided South African society.

Moya was the only girl, and six years younger than her fellow students at St. John’s School in the Transkei; across the whole of South Africa she was one of a tiny number to advance beyond elementary education. Over the course of their three-year correspondence, Moya went on to Adams College in Natal. Books continued to be part of the exchange between Moya, Palmer, and Sisbusiswe (Violet) Makhanya, a Zulu community leader who had been educated in America under mission sponsorship. A deep belief and shared desire for education spanned what were often huge gulfs and painful misunderstandings between the women. That commitment, Marks suggests, was reinforced by Lily, Mabel, and Sisbusiswe’s shared, if very differing, attempts to forge independent paths in worlds largely determined by men. All three struggled with their aspirations as women: for autonomy, for choices around marriage, work, livelihood, and a life of the mind.31 Moya told Palmer soon after she had started at Adams College that part of why she was so pleased to be there was because it enabled her to escape from a marriage her uncle was arranging for her. Marriage “to a man I hated so much” she termed an “awful bondage.”32 Tragically, Lily Moya’s time at Adams did not live up to expectations; Palmer proved unable to understand Moya’s difficulties or meet her need for more than formal support. The relationship broke down. In her final letter to Palmer, Lily Moya’s pained and angry cry is that she had to leave Adams College “due to the fact that I was never meant to be a stone but a human being with feelings, not either an experimental doll.”33

In Tsitsi Dangarembga’s novel Nervous Conditions (1988), the protagonist, Tambu, is a fourteen-year-old girl in Zimbabwe’s Umtali district at the time of the independence wars, 1968–1969. Tambu reads everything “from Blyton to Bronte” in the bedroom she shares with her cousin in the mission home of her schoolmaster uncle.34 For Lily and Tambu, reading was not the path to the classic integrative bildungsroman. The impossibility of reconciling the conflicts of gender, colonial position, class, mobility, Christianity, imagination, village, and town with being an educated woman led to mental illness. Twentieth-century southern Africa is not the Caribbean of the 1830s, but Bertha Mason’s shadow hovers. Lily Moya and Tambu are close proximates, in time and place, for the kind of independent women against whom Kenya’s Wanjau was writing (see chapter 10, this volume).
If Wanjau’s place for formulation of ideas was the detention camps of the 1950s Kenyan Emergency, Moya and Tambu’s parallel was the late colonial mission classroom—also a place of confinement, rules, uniforms, sex segregation, and reading.

If Lily Moya and Tambu’s experiences speak starkly of the constraints colonialism continued to exercise over gendered autonomy, the enduring popularity of *Jane Eyre* also underlines how remarkably long-lasting was the quest for sovereignty of the gendered imperial self. When *Jane Eyre* first appeared in 1847 readers were shocked, and thrilled, by Brontë’s depiction of an impassioned, articulate heroine who spoke back to power as a subordinate. The anonymous reviewer of *Jane Eyre* in the April 1848 issue of the *Christian Remembrancer* accused Brontë of “moral Jacobinism.” “Unjust, unjust” burned on every page.35 At a moment when Chartist petitioners gathered en masse at Kennington Common and revolutionary insurrection ran through Paris streets, such an allegation carried a charge.36 From the opening scene, where Jane’s angry outburst against the taunting violence of John Reed gets her sent to the red room, Brontë’s narrator-protagonist is engaged in resistance: speaking out, acting independently, remembering the cruelties, injustices, and deprivations that her lesser position entails. *Jane Eyre*’s angry indictment is a powerful critique of the system by which English women were destined to lives as chattels, decorative dependents, dutiful companions, or conduits for family reputations, names, and fortunes. Brontë’s book might have physically resembled the bookish spine of manly authority, but it took direct aim at the exercise of such authority in political economy, law, and social convention. In this way we can see *Jane Eyre* as a text propelled into circulation, and sustained in circulation, long beyond the particular era and setting in which it originated. Sovereignty on the small scale, over an autonomous self, a reader in command of her self, was the utopian promise that *Jane Eyre* long illuminated in the global imagination. The book is one of resistance.

At Lowood School, where she is starved, at Thornfield, where she is humiliated, and at Moor House, where she is bound by obligation, Jane resists. As the narrator of her trials, Jane is at pains to explain that the position from which she writes (the Jane she is and has become), the Jane who “speaks” directly to her reader, is the work of an insistent inner self. The outer person, the unprepossessing appearance, the humble station, are unreliable guides to what lies within. “Do you think, because I am poor, obscure, plain, and little, I am soulless and heartless? You think wrong—I
have as much soul as you—and full as much heart.” Jane speaks audaciously, dangerously, against her superiors. Her words are thrown at a man with power, property, age, money, family, station—her master. *Jane Eyre* turned the tables on power. It is this story of resistance, a resistance rooted in an autonomous self, that gives *Jane Eyre* enduring power as a tale against oppression. The “inside being,” the individual who thinks, feels, and acts, is the book’s promise to all. The book inspired a genre of self-formation narratives; works significant for telling of women’s and other subordinate groups’ struggles of becoming “the one” rather than “the other.”

*Jane Eyre*’s story of weak against strong takes place within the sovereign world conjured by the book. *Jane Eyre*’s story, of a woman who challenges the powers ranged against her, overcoming them to tell her own story of survival and success, is one of remarkable longevity. The first-person tale provides the reader with a powerful and intimate experience of self-rule. In doing so the book and the self become one. In *Jane Eyre* there is a clear example of the book as a proxy for autonomous selfhood. In the portable, mobile, compact form of the book lay the promise of sovereignty of the self that *Jane Eyre*’s coming-of-age tale relayed. That story was one that captured the global imagination, living on far beyond the mid-nineteenth-century world of its creation and initial circulation.

### Wide Sargasso Sea and the Repossession of *Jane Eyre*

In Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) defiance was turned on *Jane Eyre*. Rhys was a contemporary of C. L. R. James, born in Dominica but living much of her life in France and later in England. Rhys’s brilliant novel gives us the backstory to Brontë’s classic. Antoinette Cosway, the main narrator, is Rhys’s reimagining of Brontë’s Bertha Mason, the madwoman in the attic. *Wide Sargasso Sea* takes us to the world before Brontë’s book begins: the Caribbean port of Spanish Town, Jamaica, and the Windward Islands, in the postemancipation 1830s. In so doing Rhys reconfigures the commons *Jane Eyre* produces for late twentieth-century readers as imperial and historic rather than transcendent and literary. It is Antoinette who has life, agency, spirit and exercises it outside and against “the man who hates her” (her unnamed husband, the character we recognize as Rochester).

In this specific space of empire, Antoinette’s narration tells of a past—her own, as the daughter of a Creole mother and a father who died too soon—and, through her traumatic childhood memories, of a place simmering with
insecurity, threatened with violence, poverty, and hostility. Groomed as an heiress, Antoinette is pursued by an Englishman whose family’s mercenary ambitions bring him to the unfamiliar place of the Caribbean in search of a marriage partner who will bring him capital. The Cosway and Rochester family fortunes link the wealth of the former slave colonies to provincial England at a time of political and economic crisis. In part 3 of Wide Sargasso Sea Antoinette is in the upper attic of what we recognize as Thornfield Hall, bringing Rhys’s world directly into that of Brontë’s Jane, connecting the two books.

Whereas Charlotte Brontë had resolved her protagonist’s fate by banishing the non-English elements of Jane Eyre’s ventures, Rhys reinserts the plot and character into an imperial setting. Spivak depicted the connection between the two works as a form of “mirroring”; the link might be considered a more dynamic and entangled one.40

Wide Sargasso Sea took direct aim at the textual monuments of empire and at an imperial commons in which the book reigned supreme. In place of veneration, Rhys’s Wide Sargasso Sea throws the book (and pen, paper, and print culture generally) to the margins, where it decays, to be consumed by insects. The characters who have knowledge are those who do not read and write. By this means, Rhys not only provincialized the book but struck at the authority of the “paper empire.” At Granbois, the family estate where she is to spend her honeymoon, Antoinette points her husband to the door that leads to his dressing-room. For the first time Rochester finds comfort in a space furnished in a familiar style. There is “a carpet, the only one I had seen, a press,” and under the open window, “a small writing-desk with paper, pens, and ink.” For a moment he thinks of it as a refuge.41 Over the desk was “a crude bookshelf made of three shingles strung together.” Moving closer, Rochester reads the spines of the volumes leaning on the shelf: “Byron’s poems, novels by Sir Walter Scott, Confessions of an Opium Eater, some shabby brown volumes, and on the last shelf, Life and Letters of... The rest was eaten away.”42 The stature of the volumes, exemplars of the “surrogate Englishman in his highest and most perfect state,” mirrors his own.43 But on closer inspection his confidence dissolves. The books’ physical state is one of neglect and decay. Now the bound books sitting on a shelf sound a warning: Byron, Scott, Thomas de Quincey’s Confessions (1821), and most of all, the partial remains of a personified title (Life and Letters) whose very identity and body had been consumed “eaten away” rather than read. Rhys denies the book a complete title in the same way she denies An-
toinette’s husband a name. At the conclusion of the scene Rochester has no memory and no written words: “As for my confused impressions they will never be written. There are blanks in my mind that cannot be filled up.”

Alongside Rochester’s loss of memory and disorientation, the old woman Christophine, who has been Antoinette’s faithful black nurse and attendant throughout her life, is the repository of knowledge. But as she tells him, her knowing does not rely on paper and writing: “Read and write I don’t know. Other things I know.”

Rhys’s titles are carefully selected. Scott’s work features in Brontë’s original when Rivers gives Jane a copy of Scott’s Marmion; Thomas de Quincey’s Confessions of an Opium Eater was published in 1821; Life and Letters of . . . points at the memorialization of lives preserved between covers. The passage offers further evidence of Woolf’s observation that books continue each other, even as they exist as separate titles. They live in each other’s pages, or are sentenced to decay in such pages. The looping back and forth in time—from Rhys’s publication in 1966 to Sir Walter Scott and Quincey (1821) to Jane Eyre first in 1847—illustrates the temporal fluidity of the imperial commons.

Rhys’s depiction of books as unsettling signifiers of Rochester’s vulnerability and confused state of mind extends Brontë’s use of books as measures of value in her characters. The affective power of books that Leah Price describes is apparent in Brontë’s original and at work in Rhys’s reimagining. Brontë uses books as objects to tell us about characters and the moral world they inhabit. We know John Reed as bad—and someone our protagonist-narrator Jane will have to battle against—when he bursts in on her “double retirement” in the window seat with Berwick’s Birds, throwing the book at her head in the opening scene of Jane Eyre. Similarly, St. John Rivers’s cold, duty-centered, passive authoritarian character is indicated by his reading habits. He holds books rather than reads them; gives them to others rather than letting them chose their own; puts away Jane’s books. Even in the company of his loved and loving sisters around the breakfast table, he sits with “a book in his hand—it was his unsocial custom to read at meals.” Nor do books, paper, or reading bring Jane and St. John Rivers together. Rather, these things set the terms on which they relate as unequals. Rivers requires Jane to join him in learning Hindustani as part of his preparation for mission work. He sets her to work in the village schoolroom of his parish. He puts away her books, and his own, telling her she “shall take a walk” with him, alone. He chooses the verses and reads the Bible at the household’s
evening prayers. He reads the lawyer’s letter telling Jane of her bequest, a letter that has come to him as a clergyman in the district “who knows things and people.” It is all one-way traffic from higher to lower, man to woman, powerful to powerless, instilling obligation and requiring from the recipient a gesture of gratitude. We know the cozy drawing room at Moor House is furnished with books, but it is Jane, and St. John Rivers’s sisters, Diana and Mary, who read together in loving companionship. Their brother declines to join the circle. St. John Rivers does not receive but distributes. Books are part of his world of obligation, of inequality, of superior to inferior. He is “implacable,” someone who cannot be resisted. Jane tells us “I could not resist him.” He is impervious.

Crucial to Price’s argument for the nineteenth-century origins of the privileged style of reading associated with the bound novel is the distinction between novel and tract. One is an object in the market, the exterior value (price for sale) denoting an interior value of absorbing and pleasurable reading experience (consumption). The other is a flimsier and duller thing, distributed rather than sold, and thereby signaling a reading of duty and effort rather than absorption. Rivers is the tract to the glamorous and more enticing Rochester-as-novel. Rivers, unlike Rochester (and Jane), has no “inside.” He proposes marriage to Jane as a partnership of duty rather than love; he has virtue and principle in abundance, but he has no feelings; he has a vocation, but he cares little of what its pursuit might mean for those closest to him; he has many advantages in the world—he is loved, he is looked after, he is respected—yet he rarely shows any feelings. In the last we see of Rivers, and it is with his fate the novel closes, he is in India fulfilling his missionary vocation. “He entered on the path he had marked for himself; he pursues it still. A more resolute, indefatigable pioneer never wrought amidst rocks and dangers.” Jane tells us that “St John is unmarried: he never will marry now.” Rivers remained virginal, an unread text.

In the end Jane chooses love and desire at home rather than duty and service abroad; the novel (Rochester) over the tract (Rivers). The hard cash of an inheritance that enables her to follow her heart is “an affair of the actual world,” a material thing in both physical and economic senses. So too was Charlotte Brontë’s own book, for all that she played with the distinctions between outer covers and appearances and inner value. Her letter to Smith, Elder in October 1847 clearly separated “the good paper, clear type,” and “seemly outside” of her own book from “the work” inside; herself as author
(with whom the book’s future failure or success would lie) from her publisher (whose responsibility for its material form was now complete). But the separation was, as she knew, a compelling fiction. The material form and life of the book was inseparable from the tale it contained.

*Jane Eyre*’s insistence on the possibility of the independent inner life makes Brontë’s work significant as an inspirational coming-of-age story, a novel of self-formation. From the classic English form of mid-nineteenth-century social novels, the genre has developed and adapted, exploring relations between individuals and their societies across many contexts. For women, *Jane Eyre* has long been a reverberant text, speaking for a full personhood where gender remains a central axis for inequality. In colonies and former colonies, coming-of-age novels have been part of the struggle against subjection and toward autonomy. Yet *Jane Eyre*’s position in the imperial nexus is tangled. While Brontë’s work has been central in providing a universal story of the individual overcoming social conditions, it is also a work that is highly specific. As Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* and Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions* attest, *Jane Eyre* is also part of an “Englishness,” a culture of empire, that continues to imprison the mind, to limit subjectivity. This contradiction, the problem of whether there can be a postcolonial bildungsroman, remains. In a related way, James Slaughter has pointed to the influence of coming-of-age narrative in the making of a twentieth-century culture, as well as of the international law, of human rights. The universal path to “self-development” is one with specific historical origins. *Jane Eyre* is a part of a cultural history that has created the notion of the fully realized individual, the textual inner self. “Human rights and the *Bildungsroman,*” Slaughter argues, “are mutually enabling fictions: each projects an image of the other’s vision of the ideal relations between individual and society.” His message is: beware what we read!

**Conclusion**

*Jane Eyre* has had a remarkably long life in the shifting assemblage of empire. Commercial capillaries that first propelled the book into a mid-nineteenth-century global market have accreted other motors of circulation. In the process the work has gathered its own history, evident in the multiple lives of Brontë’s characters, in the experiences of readers, and in the works that have taken up from the original text. *Jane Eyre*’s disturbing, thrilling, violent,
passionate pages have been constantly remade. *Jane Eyre* is unusual in that it runs against the much broader tide of “downward mobility.”¹⁵⁹ Along with a clutch of other works, Brontë’s novel occupies the venerated, isolated outcrop visible above the waves below which most nineteenth-century print has disappeared. The glowing light of canonical status shines on the very small selection of works poised there. The shine is of gold as well as glory. The book has a rising stock as a material object, in particular, in its “original,” first edition form. The “good paper, clear type and seemly outside” in which Smith, Elder published the first copies of *Jane Eyre* now carry a value far beyond the words on the page. That value is not in reading but in owning one of a highly select group of titles that fall into an asset class as “investment collectables.” In Christie’s New York auction rooms a first edition of *Jane Eyre* was sold in December 2012 for $68,500.⁶⁰ At the same time, thousands of new copies in various highly affordable editions, and even cheaper secondhand copies, are readily available for sale. Not all *Jane Eyres* are equal.

Across the great variety of print cultures and readerships within which *Jane Eyre* has found a place, the book has taken aim at the legitimacy of authority, opening a pathway of resistance. Jane’s voice against the men who seek to control her destiny has spoken strongly against the gendered structures of imperial power. But this has not been its only place. *Jane Eyre* has also consolidated an empire-in-print, inscribing in the global imagination a notion of Englishness, of sovereignty, and of the superior value of the bound volume (and the reading with which it is associated).

*Jane Eyre* continues to perform multiple work as a product and narration of empire, as inspiration of resistance to authority and in dismantling the culture of imperial “Englishness.” Brontë’s book sustains several lives. Jane, the small, slight, plain orphan governess, wins out over the enormous forces ranged against her, triumphing over the dominating Rochester and the virtuously authoritarian Rivers. Rochester and Rivers are men of imposing social status and forceful character, through whose presence imperial possibilities and histories are sunk deep into provincial England. Jane’s story, ultimately, is one of resistance followed by reconciliation on terms she can set; a contented domestic life at Ferndean is where she “speaks” to us from. The specter of Bertha has been dispatched. Jane remains alive in the minds and hearts of readers. But Jane’s life has never come to an end. Her repose at Ferndean is now disturbed by new events at Thornfield Hall (and earlier still in Antoinette Cosway’s life in Dominica and Jamaica with
Rochester). At the end of Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* Cosway tells us that now she knows “why I was brought here and what I have to do.” She sets fire to Thornfield Hall, before jumping from its rooftop battlements—to her death, into the pages of Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, or back to her life in the Caribbean? *Jane Eyre* continues to be a consolidating and challenging feature in the imperial commons. Transcending the time and place of its setting and creation, *Jane Eyre* is as alive in a postcolonial age, as a text of contention, as it was in the first decade of its existence.

NOTES

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2. Currer Bell, ed., *Jane Eyre: An Autobiography* (London: Smith, Elder, 1847), sold in three volumes for £1 11s. 6d.

3. In this sense it can be considered to be words in motion in the sense conveyed by Carol Gluck and Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, eds., *Words in Motion: Toward a Global Lexicon* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).


22. W. M. Thackeray to W. S. Williams, 23 October 1847, in Letters of Thackeray, RED, entry 4371.


31. Marks, “Changing History.”


42. Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 63.


44. Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 64.


47. *Jane Eyre*, ch. 34, 390–391.


49. *Jane Eyre*, 396.


52. *Jane Eyre*, 395.


Brontë, *Jane Eyre* • 69
55. *Jane Eyre*, 378. She sees her name in “Indian ink,” 377.
59. Derek Peterson’s phrase.