

Elizabeth Jane Wall Hinds, ed. 2005: *The Multiple Worlds of Pynchon's Mason & Dixon: Eighteenth-Century Contexts, Postmodern Observations*. New York: Camden House. 222 pp.

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Thomas Pynchon is a notoriously slow writer. Not for nothing was one of his early works entitled 'Slow Learner'. In all his writing career of at least fifty years (he will be seventy in 2007), he has written a mere five novels. On average, that is one novel every ten years. But what novels! Where Pynchon writes one brilliant novel of over five hundred pages (*Gravity's Rainbow*, *Mason & Dixon* – and his forthcoming *Against the Day* has over 1000 pages), other writers produce three mediocre to good ones. The 'slow learner' business is ironic, or pretend false modesty, at the very least. What Pynchon researches and practises in ten years, it would take us ordinary mortals twenty years, or never, to research.

But even in the Pynchon offshoot industry, or the 'Pyndustry',¹ the cogs grind slowly. The book under review here, *The Multiple Worlds of Pynchon's Mason & Dixon*, seems to have taken seven years to come to fruition. In all cases involving Pynchon, however, the wait is usually worthwhile. Elizabeth Jane Wall Hinds tells us at the beginning of her Preface that the Modern Language Association devoted its first session of the December 1998 meeting in San Francisco entirely to Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon*, which had come out the year before. She and her four fellow presenters went out to breakfast together afterwards and agreed that they all wanted to know what other experts like themselves, experts in eighteenth-century America and postmodernism, thought about the novel. Only the editor and Frank Palmeri survived the three-year "collecting" (vii) and subsequent publishing, but seven further experts joined them along the way.

The blurb on the inside cover of the book states: "This volume of new essays studies the interface between eighteenth- and twentieth-century culture both in Pynchon's novel and in the historical past. It offers fresh thinking about Pynchon's work not only because it deals with his most recent novel...". The first part of this suggests that the scholars are doing their homework on Pynchon's homework, the second part suggests that *Mason & Dixon* is not being scrutinised in isolation. This is significant for us to think about because Deborah Madsen, the reviewer of the previous collection, "the first book-length collection of essays on *Mason & Dixon*" (Madsen 2001–2: 229), *Pynchon and Mason & Dixon* (Horvath and Malin 2000), thought that the contributors were judging the novel from what they knew of Pynchon's previous works. While this new volume appears to fall into the same 'error', it is very difficult, perhaps even erroneous in itself, not to envisage the novel as part of a trajectory. Madsen also gave the editors, Brooke Horvath and Irving Malin (2000), some stick for producing a collection of essays on Pynchon that was, in her view, too homogeneous: "These essays together

1. So named, following Joseph Tabbi (2002), by Anne Mangen and Rolf Gaasland, editors of *Blissful Bewilderment: Studies in the Fiction of Thomas Pynchon*, p. 7. I am grateful to Zofia Kolbuszewska for this note, see Kolbuszewska 2002: 137.

represent a consensus view of *Mason & Dixon* – what it is and where it is to be situated within the body of Pynchon’s work.... But together they make *Mason & Dixon* seem too much like Pynchon’s earlier works, and they represent rather too consistent a viewpoint. These are weaknesses of editorial judgement...” (229). She particularly laments that the collection is all about history and narrative, and has no mention of gender or race (237). She had begun her review by blasting the editors for not including any essays by women scholars.

Thank goodness for Elizabeth Jane Wall Hinds! (Although she is the only female contributor to her volume). And at least slavery is mentioned over fifty times, race being an important topic in chapters two, three and four. Such a savage review quite naturally prompted a reply from the editors, printed in the following volume of *Pynchon Notes*. Brooke Horvath explained that he had tried to include women Pynchon scholars, having contacted at least twenty, and got a negative from all of them (Horvath 2002: 183). He also argued that a woman scholar is not necessarily going to write about women, gender or sexuality, that would be gender stereotyping, and indeed, Elizabeth Jane Wall Hinds’s Introduction to her volume, about time and history, does seem to vindicate his thesis. All of this has been a rather roundabout way to show the difficulties in putting together a collection of this nature.

Elizabeth Jane Wall Hinds’s book is divided into four sections, and goes from the general to the specific. The first section, ‘The Rounds of History’ is about historiography and narrative temporality. It comprises her authoritative ‘Introduction: The Times of *Mason & Dixon*’ and Mitchum Huehl’s “‘The Space that may not be seen’: The Form of Historicity in *Mason & Dixon*’. The second section, ‘Consumption Then and Now’ deals not only with food and consumption but with the hidden powers behind them, such as trade relationships and production based on slavery. The two essays are Brian Thill’s ‘The Sweetness of Immorality: *Mason & Dixon* and the American Sins of Consumption’ and Colin A. Clarke’s ‘Consumption on the Frontier: Food and Sacrament in *Mason & Dixon*’. ‘Space and Power’ is the title of the third section, and again, it has two essays: Pedro García-Caro’s “‘America was the only place ...’: American Exceptionalism and the Geographic Politics of Pynchon’s *Mason & Dixon*’ and Dennis M. Lensing’s ‘Postmodernism at Sea: The Quest for Longitude in Thomas Pynchon’s *Mason & Dixon* and Umberto Eco’s *The Island of the Day Before*’. In the final section, the three specific eighteenth-century cultural incidents or phenomena studied are as follows: ‘Haunting and Hunting: Bodily Resurrection and the Occupation of History in Thomas Pynchon’s *Mason & Dixon*’ by Justin M. Scott Coe; “‘Our Madmen, our Paranoid’: Enlightened Communities and the Mental State in *Mason & Dixon*’ by Ian D. Copestake, and Frank Palmeri’s ‘General Wolfe and the Weavers: Re- envisioning History in Pynchon’s *Mason & Dixon*’, a topic he ably discoursed on at the Malta ‘Transit of Venus’ Pynchon Conference in June 2004.

Elizabeth Jane Wall Hinds is quite right, but still valiant, to set out in her Introduction with the large-scale deixis of time and place and to try to give us an insight into the complexity of these seemingly-simple concepts when they fall into Pynchon’s hands (4–5). As she explains, the essays in the volume seek to explore these boundary conditions. They trace the connections between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries, two eras she describes as “discreet” (11): maybe they were, although we are not talking about the Victorian age, but they are also discrete.

She makes a further claim for the book: “These essays represent a second wave of *Mason & Dixon* scholarship, one that keeps in view the complex linkages – linear and non-linear, nostalgic and ironic, ‘other than postmodern,’ paramodern, postmodern, and early modern – that its historiography offers” (20). This statement suggests that considerable development went on in the years between the MLA conference of 1998, which must have been ‘first wave’, and the publication of the collection, also that this so-called ‘first wave’ of *Mason & Dixon* scholarship did not address such complexities. I have my doubts about this. Indeed, she herself writes “More complex readings of Pynchon’s historical method surfaced early on in the criticism as well” (17). But at least, she and the other contributors to the volume are up-to-date with the early criticism as far as it could be obtained, for example, references to Horvath and Malin and Clerc (18). Her essays “round out earlier interpretations” (18). Robert L. McLaughlin berates two authors of Pynchon monographs for not taking this into account in order to be sure of being original: “I have always thought of criticism as an ongoing conversation among scholars and of the new book or article as obliged to demonstrate its understanding of the conversation to that point so as to show how it is contributing something new” (McLaughlin 2000–1: 218).²

Professor Hinds’s Introduction, with its discussion of ‘Anachronism Now and Then’ a topic she had already visited (see Hinds 2000), and ‘Postmodern Observations’, where she recognises *Mason & Dixon* as a good example of Linda Hutcheon’s “historiographic metafiction” (18) (see Hutcheon 1988) in all its formal complexity, sets the tone for some sound research and enlightening reading. I only have one quibble: she refers to Mason and Dixon as “a couple of ordinary guys” (7). We know what she means – that Pynchon makes historical figures human – but they were far from being ordinary men, especially Mason, who was always on his high horse, with his expectation to be made Astronomer Royal on Bradley’s death. Nor did they have “an innocence of power unimaginable” (7), despite displaying a feeling of being manipulated. That she is on the right track, however, is backed up by similar priorities picked out by Francisco Collado for the *Mason & Dixon* chapter (chapter 6: “El legado es Norteamérica: *Mason & Dixon* o la resolución de los opuestos. El futuro escrito en el pasado”) of his recent monograph on Pynchon, the first in Spanish (Collado Rodríguez 2004).

Mitchum Huehls’s article, arguing, as Professor Hinds puts it, “that the narrativity of *Mason & Dixon* is constituted by a complicated commingling of moments and durations, a commingling responsible for the specific *form* of the interface between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries” (20), talks of “a structure of mutual invagination” (32), which sounds rather naughty, and is explained in terms of narrative complexity.

The two chapters on ‘Consumption Then and Now’ delve into the immorality and complacency involved in consumption and excess, comparing globalisation in the two time periods: “Food in *Mason & Dixon* becomes emblematic of colonial control as well as post-colonial difference and revolution; it becomes the embodiment of the vast network of cultural signifiers and appropriations that frame the colonial and post-

2. “Editor of the valuable *Approaches to Gravity’s Rainbow* (1983), Clerc offers us here something midway between *Cliff’s Notes* and a Twayne study as an introduction to Pynchon’s latest novel. The result might better be titled *Mason & Dixon for Dummies*” (McLaughlin 2000–1: 222). One trembles.

colonial discourse which permeates the novel, and it serves to undermine myths of cultural permanence and superiority" (78).

Pedro García-Caro takes further the discussion of Pynchon's revelations concerning the connections between consumption, domination and extermination (103). America turned out not to be the exception, the Utopia, as Mason and Dixon realised, and thus they gave up tracing the Line thirty-six miles short, since the totalitarian aspects of Enlightenment scientific progress were encroaching upon the rights of the Native Americans. García-Caro brings Adorno and Horkheimer into the theoretical side of this discussion, and, on the practical side, he has recourse to Mason's (non-fictional, authentic) *Journal* and the pro-slavery historian John H.B. Latrobe's 1854 speech to the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, *The History of the Mason and Dixon Line*, the "first recorded instance ... in which the two surveyors [sic] were fictionalized" (117). The whole makes for fascinating reading.

Dennis M. Lensing's essay about longitude in *Mason & Dixon* is the only one in the collection that introduces another work and another author for major study, which might have brought some misgivings. But it is justified, as the comparison demonstrates how the Quest for Longitude, vital though it was at the time, is not central to Pynchon's novel, as it is in Eco's. And yet, it is latently present throughout, and has a relevance, through its ramifications, to postmodernism. As Lensing says, the theme "feed[s] into ... a variety of issues" (133), from cartography, the pettiness and corruption of the Royal Society, Maskelyne and other astronomers' obsession with the stars as a solution rather than time-pieces, to the general issues of time, place, globalisation and control and their narration. The talking clocks, the 'land-as-sea' trope and its reversal (135), the de-privileging of scientific discourse, are only a few aspects or manifestations of the subject and its treatment in relation to these issues. Lensing's article becomes more ambitious towards the end, as he argues that both Pynchon and Eco use the topic of longitude "due to its strong resonance with the postmodern sense of being adrift, without bearings" to treat the quest "in such a way as to point beyond the failings and confusions of postmodernism" (142). Which leaves us in uncharted territory.

In the final section, Justin M. Scott Coe takes up Pynchon's discussion of that thorny problem, the afterlife and bodily resurrection. In spite of the physical aspects of this subject, with Mason haunted by his dead wife Rebekah and seeing her as if bodily restored, and the connections between the Eucharist and the physical presence of Christ, the 'hunt' for Christ, Calvin's 'Ascent to Christ', St Paul's doctrine set out in I Corinthians 15, to which Rev. Cherrycoke refers, the argument is very abstract, and the reader could have done with some headings or subheadings as a guide (as there are in certain of the chapters, but not others). The argument goes on to cover the distinction between nostalgia and history, and especially Pynchon's serious concern in *Mason & Dixon* "with the influence of religion on history and history's preoccupation with futurity", as Professor Hinds puts it (22). Coe's tracing of Pynchon's treatment of this matter shows the high seriousness and yet the comic possibilities, as he reminds us that Pynchon has Fang, the Learned English Dog, give his opinion; Pynchon also has the overly melancholy, gallows-obsessed Mason consult Jenkin's Ear and then consult Dixon upon his return from the Inner Earth. "The occupation of history by the dispossessed", as Coe puts it, comes to threaten "Mason and Dixon's Enlightenment

sensibilities” (165) and this aspect feeds into one of the fascinating, yet unsolvable, discussions that Pynchon takes on.

Ian Copestake’s piece is similar to one he wrote for the volume of Pynchon essays which he more recently edited (Copestake 2003). As he shows, madness, or abnormal mental states, “has been a recurrent presence in Pynchon’s work throughout his career” (171). In his latest novel, madness is linked, through an American tradition, with divine election and national selfhood. In the early part of the essay, Copestake shows that the dichotomy land/sea has a distinct relation to stable and unstable mental states in *The Crying of Lot 49*’s Oedipa Maas. Although Mason and Dixon supposedly inhabit an enlightened age, they are surrounded by madness wherever they go, be it England, South Africa or America. Even Cherrycoke was banished from England because his moral iconoclasm was deemed insanity. Though this saved his life, it simultaneously banished his selfhood (180) and threatened his credibility as a narrator of ‘An American Tale’, which is what the LeSpark children asked for. Pynchon’s interplay of historical truth and a celebration of the absurd through flights of fancy form part of the discussion of what happened, what did not happen and what may have happened.

This subject leads neatly into Frank Palmeri’s discussion of a very specific choice of historical topic. He demonstrates how Pynchon scrupulously observed what we have on historical record for the episode of General Wolfe and the Stroud weavers of 1756–7, and yet manipulated the character and role of Wolfe himself, making him harsher towards the striking weavers than the historical record suggests. As Pynchon re-visions this episode, Palmeri puts forward his theory: “Perhaps Pynchon identifies General Wolfe and the country Justices of the Peace with a Britain that is hierarchical, imperialistic and oppressive, while, because of their contact with the early American landscape, he allows Mason and Dixon an access to other perspectives, an openness to other possibilities that he associates with the early days of America” (196). It is this type of minute study by eighteenth-century experts like Professor Palmeri which reveals Pynchon’s working methods, and ultimately, his intentions and priorities.

This volume is a must for all Pynchon scholars, and equally obligatory reading for anyone interested in recent American fiction, postmodernist fiction, or generally the direction of culture and fiction at the beginning of the twenty-first century. For, as Pynchon shows us, things do not happen overnight. The America we have today, indeed the world, was forged centuries ago, and to explain it, we need to look at historical documents, but also search for traces of what was but was not given importance, was lost or might have been. All of these are Pynchon’s hunting grounds.

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