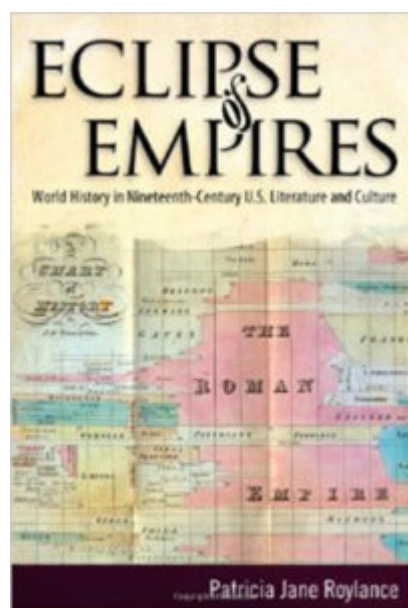
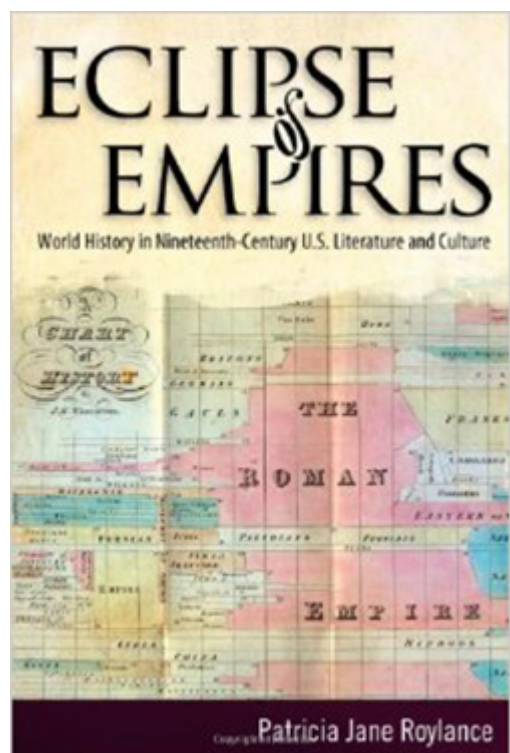


## Doomed to Repeat It



Patricia Jane Roylance, *Eclipse of Empires: World History in Nineteenth-Century U.S. Literature and Culture*. University of Alabama Press, 2013. 240 pp., \$44.95.

Panic over the United States' decline has become a cornerstone of the twenty-four hour news cycle and the pithy op-ed, not to mention the apocalyptic disaster movie. The sources of this alleged decline are numerous, from income inequality to trod-upon freedoms to the obsession with Kim and Kanye. In her original and timely study, Patricia Roylance argues that the anxiety over the

nation's decline is not only an old one, but one spurred by the nineteenth-century production of early modern histories of imperial eclipse. At the very moment when *domestic* histories would presumably be the privileged site of study and interest, nineteenth-century U.S. writers turned to global historical examples to study imperial decline and, in turn, spur "nationalist self-scrutiny" (2). Roylance's study engages neglected texts by familiar literary authors, such as James Fenimore Cooper, Washington Irving, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and brings them into conversation with lesser-known histories by William Hickling Prescott and John Lothrop Motley. By linking the rise and fall of past empires with the unfolding story of the U.S., all of these writers offered a sobering corrective to the "ideology of triumphant national exceptionalism" (3).

Marked by "morbid anxiety" rather than unbridled optimism, the texts that anchor Roylance's book presume that the United States' trajectory differs little from that of other empires; rather than an exceptional new experiment, the U.S. shared the same vulnerabilities of past civilizations, especially intranational conflicts. For Roylance, eclipse narratives "treat international history as intranational prognosis" by identifying trends in the global past that had domestic implications in the nineteenth century (5). As writers and readers came to better understand the intricacies of global history, they became "sensitized ... to the great variety of internal weaknesses undermining the soundness of the United States" (13). To broaden her readers' understanding of how early modern global history was put to use in contemporary domestic contexts, Roylance deploys Mary Louise Pratt's notion of "contact zones" and Wai Chee Dimock's theory of "deep time." The history books featured in her study, both as material objects traveling across space and time and as studies of space and time, create what Roylance calls "a spatiotemporal form of the contact zone," obscuring the borders between past and present, Europe and the U.S., the foreign and the familiar (6). For Roylance, nineteenth-century imperial eclipse narratives did not serve as purely cautionary tales nor as negative examples. Rather, they functioned to draw out the "radically dissimilar and yet eerily, uncomfortably similar" social, political, and economic situations of the antebellum U.S. and the world's failed empires. These uncanny encounters (though not Roylance's term, it seems appropriate here) made the eventual eclipse of the United States seem at once inevitable and avoidable. Roylance centers her compelling analysis on these points of friction.

In chapter one, Roylance examines the ascendancy and eventual decay of Italy in James Fenimore Cooper's *The Water-Witch* (1830) and *The Bravo* (1831). Roylance's reading of *The Water-Witch*, set in the area around New York Harbor, highlights the cyclical view of history to which many nineteenth-century thinkers ascribed by affiliating the enterprising Americans with the once-great Italian empire. Throughout the novel, Cooper compares Italy's "fading fortunes" with the United States' "youthful vigor" (in Cooper's words), particularly in commercial enterprise (26). *The Bravo*, on the other hand, sets up the self-scrutinizing work Roylance describes in her introduction. By setting the novel in the heyday

of the Venetian republic, Cooper invites comparison with the thriving United States, though always emphasizing the crucial differences—such as geographic size—that would protect the U.S. from a similar decline. Roylance's most compelling discussion in this set of readings relates to Cooper's location of "American principles" outside the country's borders and the public's skepticism of such a dislocation. Coupling the novels with Cooper's pamphlet, *A Letter to His Countrymen* (1834), Roylance points to tension between Cooper's advocacy for a truly republican and American literary tradition and his critics' accusations of "anti-populist elitism" (41). In the chapter's conclusion, Roylance raises the crucial question of whether Cooper's imperial eclipse narratives were cautionary tales of political self-destruction or gripes about his own "personal, socio-economic eclipse" (44).

Chapter two shifts toward conquest, rather than gradual decline, in a consideration of William Hickling Prescott's 1847 *History of the Conquest of Peru*. Roylance's reading of this under-studied history reveals that Prescott "identifies the United States as much with the conquered Incas as he does with the Spanish conquerors" even if, ultimately, he laments the resemblances to both cultures (48). Prescott saw the Incan decline as the natural result of their rejection of private property, although he decried the Spaniards' enslavement of the vanquished Incas, and compared their "lust of gold" to the unbridled capitalism that characterized the antebellum U.S. In the end, Prescott's desire to protect personal property rights exceeded his disgust for slavery, a point borne out in his description of Bartolomé de las Casas and others' efforts to emancipate Incan slaves from Spanish captivity as "illusory schemes of benevolence" (67). Ultimately, Prescott's specious logic points to the difficulties of maintaining a middle ground in nineteenth-century matters of property rights and laissez-faire capitalism.

In chapter three, Roylance takes up John Lothrop Motley's 1856 *Rise of the Dutch Republic*, emphasizing the nation's struggle for independence from Spain. Reading the Dutch revolt and the Glorious Revolution in England as direct ideological precursors of both the Puritan migration to New England and the American Revolution, Motley traces "an august lineage of Anglo-Saxon struggles devoted to the ideals of freedom and progress" (79). This teleology is not terribly unusual in nineteenth-century histories, but what sets Motley's case apart is the way it was received by reviewers as a "deeply anti-Catholic text" (88). In reviews of Motley, writers focused on the resemblance between the U.S. and the oppressive Spanish, rather than the rising Dutch, fostering what Roylance describes as an "anxiety-producing type of contact zone" between early modern Europe and the antebellum U.S. (76). Thus, Motley's text inadvertently spurred debate over religious liberties in the nineteenth century and invited criticism of the United States' treatment of religious minorities.

In chapters four and five, Roylance shifts her focus toward narratives of empires being eclipsed through cultural erasure. Rather than global histories foreshadowing national possibilities, these histories demonstrate how the U.S. attempted to secure its imperial strength through forced assimilation. Chapter

four centers on Irving's *A History of New York* (1809), offering a fresh analysis of Irving's satire by focusing on the ethnic Dutch residents' "stubborn resistance to assimilation" and their choice to remain "foreign" even after nationhood is achieved (103). Irving characterizes such resistance as not only futile but foolish, and in so doing he "contains the threat of the failed imperial past by quarantining its likeness among the ethnic Dutch" rather than expanding its application to the nation as a whole, as Cooper, Prescott, and Motley had done (115). The source of the Dutch's cultural decline, though, has more to do with the Anglicizing of the colonies and eventually the nation rather than any corruption within Dutch culture. Likewise, Roynance asserts that Longfellow's use of Ojibwe language and place-names in *The Song of Hiawatha*—the focus of chapter five—serves to keep the Ojibwe "presence in the landscape alive" rather than to criticize or romanticize their "vanishing" (120). But Roynance points to another, more unexpected, version of cultural erasure in her consideration of the poem's reception and its affiliation with the Finnish epic poem *Kalevala* (first collected and published in 1835). The affiliation stems from the popular "Vinland" hypothesis that gave Viking claims to the New World priority over Native American ones and "helped validate the racial ideology of Anglo-Saxonism that fueled U.S. manifest destiny" (120). Thus, rather than romantically solemnizing the eclipse of the Ojibwe, Longfellow sought to preserve their presence amidst the cultural eclipsing of Native American history by Viking history in the nineteenth century. By creating a "complicated linguistic and territorial picture" of the Ojibwe (135) and narrating an intricate tale of inter-tribal conflict, Longfellow, Roynance contends, attempted to rescue Native American history from oversimplification and homogenization.

Though Roynance intermittently addresses the subject, especially in her first three chapters, the reader wonders to what extent these writers' positions of privilege inform their fears of an eventual eclipse of the United States. What Roynance describes as a diffuse "anxiety" over the nation's decline is clearly also rooted in the authors' impulse to protect the old guard. How did other writers in less privileged positions interpret the rise and fall of empires, and how might these interpretations compare with those Roynance has identified? Stephen G. Hall's study *A Faithful Account of the Race* (2009) gives some revelatory examples from writers like Hosea Easton, Henry Highland Garnet, and James W.C. Pennington, who cast Anglo-Saxon history as barbarous rather than progressive. These writers foregrounded African history from ancient times to the present to "combat the idea of alleged black inferiority caused by the supposed backwardness of Africa" (76). For the authors Roynance studies, personal hardships became harbingers of national decline, while the same were used by African American historians, in Hall's examples, as indicators of cultural and racial fortitude and longevity. Thus, while Roynance admits in her introduction that eclipse narratives were often authored by white men of privilege, in part because of the funds and education required to conduct long-term archival research in the period, writers of diverse backgrounds also turned to world historical events to make sense of the present and predict (or warn against) the future.

Roylance concludes with a look at the role of the “present” in imperial eclipse narratives. She begins with Francis Parkman’s *Montcalm and Wolfe*, which carries readers up to Parkman’s “present” (1884), looking at the swiftness with which historical narrative collides with contemporary fears and how quickly rise turns to decline in the “relentless cyclical pattern of imperial eclipse” (150). In a somewhat awkward pairing, Roylance then discusses Mel Gibson’s film *Apocalypto* (2006), which casts Mayan decline as inevitable in the face of Spanish conquest, while simultaneously valorizing segments of Mayan society. In discussing *Apocalypto*, Roylance suggests that the form of the imperial eclipse narrative has remained relatively unchanged in modern times and still performs similar political work. Roylance’s last line is sobering as she looks toward “various empires poised to eclipse us.” In this, she sounds a bit like the authors she cites. Yet, even while conceding to the “rise of the rest” (as Fareed Zakaria put it), pundits have recently suggested that the very language of rise and fall may now be defunct. For example, the title of a *New Yorker* review of Ian Bremmer’s 2012 book *Every Nation for Itself* posed, “Is the End of American Dominance the Same as American Decline?” The answer is up for debate, of course, but what Bremmer and others have begun to envisage, in the tradition of the authors Roylance studies, is not just a U.S. eclipse, but the eclipse of empires altogether.

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