

Re-writing History in Jane Urquhart's The Whirlpool

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اعادة كِتَابَةِ التَّأْرِیْخِ فِی رِوَايَةِ الدَّوَامَةِ لُجَّیْنِ اوركوهارت

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المستخلص

تتحدث رواية الدوامة للكاتبة جين أوكوهارت عن مساهمات الكنديين وتضحياتهم في حرب ١٨١٢، تلك التضحيات التي تجاهلتها السجلات التاريخية للمستعمرين الإنكليز والأميركان على حد سواء. يبين هذا البحث كيف تقدم الرواية سردية جديدة أكثر شمولية تتحدى وتدحض التدوين الاستعماري من خلال تبني الكاتبة وجهة النظر الكندية. لدراسة هذه الرؤيا التاريخية في رواية الدوامة، يعتمد هذا البحث نظرية ما بعد الاستعمار التي تسببت في خلاف استعماري حول منهجية كتابة التاريخ. وأخيرا يطرح هذا البحث خلاصة مفادها ان النص الادبي يملك القدرة على كتابة نص تاريخي بديل أكثر شمولية واوسع تمثيلا وهو، بذلك، يتحدى السردية الاستعمارية التقليدية.

الكلمات المفتاحية:

المنظور الكندي، التأريخ الاستعماري، جين أوكوهارت، اعادة كتابة، الدوامة.

Abstract

Jane Urquhart's The Whirlpool addresses the overlooked contributions and sacrifices of Canadians in the War of 1812, which have been largely absent from colonial documents written by British and American historians. By focusing on the reality of war from a Canadian perspective, the novel offers a new and inclusive narrative of the war, one that challenges and falsifies the colonial record. This paper uses the theory of post-colonialism, which brings the colonizers and the colonized into a dispute over writing history, to investigate the events of the novel. This paper concludes that literary texts, such as novels, have the potential to construct alternative histories, providing a more comprehensive and representative account that counters the traditional colonial narrative.

Keywords: Canadian perspective, colonial history, Jane Urquhart, rewriting, Whirlpool.

Introduction

The Historical Background to the 1812 War

Following the Revolutionary War (1775–1783), the Americans overthrew British colonial power and declared their independence, forcing the British and their allies to retreat to Canada, which remained a British province. Tensions remained between the United States and the United Kingdom despite the end of direct military action. For example, the British Navy further escalated tensions by intimidating American trade ships (Belshaw 2015). While the British were engaged in the Napoleonic Wars in Europe, the Americans launched a military campaign to drive the British out of Canada, the last British colony in North America. The Americans mistakenly believed that invading Canada would be an easy task and that they would be warmly welcomed by pro-independence Canadians. However, this assumption proved to be misguided (Ibid).

According to Roger Riendeau, two reasons brought the 1812 war to an end. The first was that the British had moved troops into North America to defend Canada after the Napoleonic war in Europe was over. The second reason was the failure of the successive American attacks on Canadian territories. Riendeau confirms:

Both sides [the Americans and the British] were anxious to negotiate an end to the war. The treaty of Ghent, signed on Christmas Eve 1814 was an armistice that resorted the prewar boundaries and scarcely addressed the issue that had instigated the conflict. (2007, 115-6)

Today, the Canadians feel excluded from the colonial documents of the War of 1812, as it is often referred to in history books as an “American-British War”. For Canadians, their decisive

contributions and the significant sacrifices made by many Canadians during the conflict are largely overlooked. However, novelist Jane Urquhart takes the initiative to rewrite the narrative of the War of 1812 as a distinctly Canadian issue in her novel *The Whirlpool*. Urquhart's novel seeks to give representation to the Canadians who actively fought and contributed to the war.

Rewriting History in Urquhart's novels

Rewriting history has dominated Urquhart's novels since the beginning of her career as a novelist. Urquhart believes that many of the nation's stories remain untold. This perspective becomes evident when she says in an interview, "Our own past, as Canadians, was not taken into any kind of serious consideration" (quoted in Wyile 2007, 84). This vision is also expressed through her character Ann in *Changing Heaven* (1990), who states, "In Canada much of the past has been thrown away. No one cares. No one records it. It was very hard for me, losing the past like that" (Urquhart 1990, 83). Similarly, this sentiment is voiced in *The Whirlpool*, the novel in question, where Urquhart laments that "this country buries its history so fast [and] people with memories are considered insane" (1993, 83). In fact, the history Urquhart is looking for is one that represents Canadian perspectives. The history of Canada's involvement in the first and second wars, for instance, is similarly criticized by Urquhart, who claims that it presents "the point of view of the British empire, not from the point of what happened to Canada" (quoted in Wyile 2007, 84).

Theoretical Background

This paper utilizes post-colonial theory to analyze the events and characters in Jane Urquhart's *The Whirlpool*. This perspective highlights the destructive impact of colonialism on the colonized populations. It emphasizes that the colonizers manipulate

language to create narratives that undermine and diminish the culture and identity of those they colonize. Furthermore, it posits that decolonization has opened opportunities to produce a national narrative that challenges colonial assertion.

The colonizers and the colonized are the two parties involved in colonialism as an operation. Europeans are typically the ones who colonized non-

European nations in Asia, Latin America, and Africa. Geographically speaking, Canada does not belong to the so-called Third World. Its economic and social structure is strongly linked to that of the European colonizing countries. In

addition, the vast majority of Canadians are of European descent. However, according to Hans Bertens, some critics attempt to broaden the post-colonial historical and geographical perspective to encompass Canada as a 'white settler colony.' Bertens elucidates:

Some critics have vigorously defended the inclusion of white settler colonies such as Australia, New Zealand, and Canada, arguing that their inhabitants, too, have suffered displacement and marginalization at the hands of imperialism and have been forced to develop cultural identities against the odds of imperial relations. (Bertens 2001, 201-2)

There is certainly some evidence that supports the critics' perspectives on Canada's post-colonial status. One of these evidences is that Canada was colonized twice, like many other post-colonial nations. The first colonization was by military means when Europeans began arriving in the 1700s, especially the British and French. This colonial control persisted until the end of the Second World War (1945). The second colonization was by non-military means. It was when

Canada was exposed to the wide-ranging cultural and economic repercussions of the colonial empire in the USA during the post-war decades. Canada, according to Howard Doughty, “has gone from colony to nation to colony” (2005, 3). It could be inferred from this that the establishment of national institutions to create a record that represents all of the events that tell Canada’s story was quite hard.

The perception of Canada as a post-colonial nation is further reinforced by the presence of diverse ethnic communities within its society. In 1971, the Canadian government enacted the Multiculturalism Act, which facilitated the immigration of individuals from non-European nations, allowing them to become Canadian citizens. Since that time, each influx of non-White immigrants has propelled Canada toward becoming a multiracial society. Additionally, the literary works of immigrant authors, such as Michael Ondaatje and M. G. Vassanji, which reflect their experiences in their homelands under European colonial rule, have played a significant role in redefining Canada’s identity as a post-colonial nation.

The Whirlpool significantly contributes to the reinforcement of Canada’s identity as a post-colonial nation. From a narrative perspective, the author’s rejection of the colonizers’ accounts of the War of 1812, along with the ongoing efforts to create an alternative narrative that acknowledges Canada’s contributions to the conflict, serves as evidence of Urquhart’s intention to portray Canada as a post-colonial nation. All of this evidence reinforces Canada’s identity as a post-colonial nation. As a result, the theoretical framework applied to analyze the events and characters in *The Whirlpool* allows this paper to uncover the text’s deeper significance.

Previous Studies

Most, if not all, of Urquhart's novels engage with issues related to Canadian history and the events that have been overlooked, yet very few critics have discussed that engagement. Herb Wyile is one of these critics; he places Urquhart's novels within a context that includes a range of contemporary novels, characterizing them as a "resistance...to monologic and Eurocentric versions of Canadian history" (Wyile 2002, xiv). This paper agrees with Wyile that the history depicted in these novels is, in fact, a form of resistance against the colonial narrative shaped by European colonial impacts. However, this paper differs by focusing on how this resistance record is constructed in *The Whirlpool*, a topic not addressed in Wyile's critical works.

Mei-Chuen Wang shares a similar perspective on Urquhart's novels. As a researcher, Wang examines Urquhart and her works through a post-colonial lens. He posits that Urquhart invites readers into a pivotal moment in Canadian history and endeavors to rewrite it, illustrating the Canadian nature of that moment. He states:

Part of Urquhart's postcolonial undertaking [is] to retrieve a past and represent it from a Canadian perspective, and to reinscribe Canadian history with its local specificities as a counter-discourse to the colonialist construction imposed by the imperial power. (Wang 2010, 204)

This paper serves as a continuation of previous studies conducted on Urquhart's novels. However, it is limited to discussing how in *The Whirlpool* she crafted a narrative that challenges the colonizers' account of the War of 1812.

Retelling the Canadian Story of the 1812 War

One of the central thematic ideas raised in *The Whirlpool* regarding the War of 1812 is the Canadian struggle with the colonial perception that Canada is merely a land, not a nation. The colonial powers—particularly the British and the Americans—failed to grant the Canadians a space to cultivate a sense of national identity. As a result, the Canadians find themselves trapped between two bitter choices as explicitly stated in *The Whirlpool*: “We’re either the property of one nation or another. We’re either Americans or we’re British” (Urquhart 1993, 210). While the Americans sought to annex Canada into their newly established empire, and the British aimed to retain Canada as a colony, the Canadians fought to establish their country as an independent nation. In this sense, no one fought for the sake of Canada except the Canadians themselves.

Urquhart frames the War of 1812 as a distinctly Canadian issue, placing Canadian interests at the forefront before it becomes a priority for the British and American colonizers. For Urquhart, the sacrifices of Canadians in the war are undeniable, as Canada was the actual battlefield. Canadians actively participated not to support the British occupiers, but to defend their own land from a new threat—the American invaders. Indeed, the significance of *The Whirlpool* lies not only in its revelation of many untold truths about the War of 1812 but also in its exploration of the connection between the battlefield experience and the Canadians’ growing consciousness of their national identity. As the novelist poignantly notes, “They [Canadians] may not have known this at the beginning of the conflict, but by the time it was over they knew. They knew they had a country” (Urquhart 1993, 210). This illustrates how the war

catalyzed national awakening, marking the birth of a distinct Canadian identity.

This research is based on the assumption that the history created in *The Whirlpool* serves as an alternative to the colonial record of the War of 1812—an inclusive and original history that challenges established narratives. It is inclusive because it gives representation to all Canadians who participated in the conflict. One of the novel's key objectives is to falsify the colonial claims, particularly the assertion that the War of 1812 was solely a British-American conflict. To achieve this, Urquhart creates a central character, David McDougal, a military leader who participated in the war and now serves as a military historian. McDougal relies on logical reasoning to refute these colonial claims. For instance, when addressing the American allegation of a “total victory” (Ibid, 84), McDougal argues that if the Americans were truly winning on the battlefield, “why all this running away, why all this casting of baggage into the river... why all this destroying ammunition? Is that the way a victorious army behaves?” (Ibid, 73). Regardless of what the Americans proclaim about the war, they cannot withstand the logical questions the narrative raises.

Logical reasoning is also employed to challenge the claims made by British historians, who assert that it was British soldiers who defended Canada against the American invasion. McDougal refutes this by pointing out that these historians had never even set foot in Canada: “They were never here... According to them, the whole goddamn war was fought by gallant sailors, all of British birth, on the briny deep” (Ibid). McDougal exposes another truth, arguing that not all the soldiers, wearing British uniforms in this war, were actually British. He explains, “The truth is, the Brits dressed some of us up in red uniforms, let some

of us fight with pitchforks in our overalls, and then they promptly forgot about all of us...” (Ibid, 84).

This narrative critique of history written from a distance, without direct experience, echoes what German philosopher and history theorist Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) refers to as reflective history— “a history whose mode of representation is not really confined by the limits of time to which it relates” (Hegel 2001, 17). It allows historians to objectively write about an event they have neither witnessed nor participated in. The danger of reflective history is that it often “gives us a description of battles, as if [the historian] had been an actual spectator” (Ibid, 18). The colonial record of the War of 1812 can be classified as reflective history, as it was written from a distance and served the interests of the colonial institutions under which the historians operated, rather than reflecting the actual experiences of those involved in the conflict.

In contrast, the history that Urquhart seeks to construct in *The Whirlpool* is an inclusive one. It gives representation to all Canadians who truly engaged in the war, including Indigenous people, one of the oldest and most marginalized groups in colonial, and even Canadian, history. Urquhart chooses to highlight figures like Laura Secord, whose participation in the war is widely acknowledged by historians for her role in thwarting an American invasion of Canada. Though she was living in a Canadian territory occupied by the Americans, Secord took a significant risk by infiltrating through enemy lines to warn Canadian troops of an imminent American military attack. To complete her mission, she had to cross dangerous wilderness on foot, demonstrating her bravery and invaluable contribution to the war effort:

The young, slim woman alone, walking through the enemy-infested, beast-ridden woods, and she has the presence of mind to bring a cow along to fool the enemy sentries. Twelve miles over a rough terrain...and then she arrives at her destination only to find her path blocked by a company of Indians...reinforcement, working for our side, but how was she to know? Indians in the moonlight...awesome! They let her pass... (Urquhart 1993, 85)

Although Secord has been the subject of many historical writings, Urquhart introduces her in a much different light. Both British and American historians have traditionally portrayed Secord as a “symbol of... loyalty to Britain” because she “warned British troops of an impending American attack” (Morgan 1994, 195-6). In other words, historians have framed Secord’s story within an imperialist discourse. However, Urquhart repositions Secord’s story within a Canadian national discourse, emphasizing her role in defending her homeland. Urquhart also highlights that Indigenous groups or “the Indians”, to whom Secord was racially connected, were “fighting for their own country” (Urquhart 1993, 210). Through this narrative, Urquhart shifts the focus from imperial loyalty to a patriotic motivation, suggesting that Secord and her ethnic group were driven by a desire to protect Canada, not just to serve British colonial interests.

In its inclusiveness, *The Whirlpool* addresses the complex and hesitant contribution of Irish Canadians in the War of 1812, who were reluctant to fight under the British military banner. They are shown to be influenced by the Fenian movement, an organization established in the U.S. that sought to spread anti-

British sentiment among Irish communities in North America. The Fenians' primary objective was to secure Ireland's independence from the U.K. However, the novelist acknowledges, "You could hardly blame the Fenians...The Irish certainly have suffered, have been the victims of an overbearing, aggressive, imperialistic [British] neighbor" (Ibid). Yet, by detailing the varied Canadian contributions to the war, the novel provides an alternative history—one that highlights the participation of non-British groups, often overlooked in the colonial narrative, offering a more nuanced and inclusive account of this historical conflict.

The history created in *The Whirlpool* is an original history, which suggests that the true account of any event should be made by those who were directly involved or were eyewitnesses to the event. Hegel categorizes historical writing into three types: original, reflective, and philosophical. According to Hegel, original history is the most trustworthy version because the writer "describes scenes in which he himself has been an actor..." (Hegel 2001, 13). Urquhart's novel embodies this original approach by filtering the narrative through the perspective and experience of those who were actively involved in the War of 1812, offering a more authentic and reliable history compared to the distant, colonial accounts.

The originality of the history constructed in *The Whirlpool* is evident through the narrator, McDougal, who represents a historical military officer and leader in the War of 1812. McDougal endeavors to make his account of historical events precise and reliable by consistently providing evidence to support his statements. For example, while talking about Laura Secord, he takes Patrick, one of his listeners, to a cemetery and points out her grave: "Laura's buried there" (Urquhart 1993, 83). The grave

serves as concrete evidence to substantiate McDougal's claims about Secord's participation in the war, particularly as an indigenous figure. This focus on tangible proof reinforces the authenticity of the history McDougal narrates.

McDougal's authentic narration is also evident when frequently takes his audience to the actual sites of fierce battles between the Canadians and the invading Americans. For example, when discussing the Battle of Lundy's Lane, he goes out of his way to bring his audience to the site where the battle occurred. Patrick, who accompanies McDougal to this location, remarks on how the land still bears the "marks" of the combat, noting, "battlefields are beautiful...you can see the marks of fighting but they are so benign...like scars...no smoother than scars" (Ibid, 210). These details not only reinforce the tangible reality of the war but also symbolize how the land itself holds the memory of those events, much like a scar that retains the memory of a wound.

McDougal relies on personal narratives and observations, what is known as oral evidence, to give further credibility and immediacy to his accounts of the war. This type of evidence is rooted in firsthand experiences. For instance, while describing the battle at the river, he vividly recounts how the invaders initiated their attack:

[I] was watching the Americans spill over the bank further down the river. Watching them spill like a dark waterfall, leap into boats and head for Queenston... Some... had been drowned when their boats capsized, the current still being very strong there. (Ibid, 127)

McDougal turns to artifacts to make his account more accessible and engaging. He diligently collects various materials

related to the armies and the battles, aiming to display them in “a pure museum” (Ibid, 172) that he is determined to establish. Artifacts and stories can exist independently, but when they come together, they enhance each other’s significance. An artifact, by itself, is an object with physical properties, gaining historical importance only when it is placed within a narrative context. Conversely, a story becomes more credible when supported by artifacts. This interplay enriches the understanding of history, allowing the audience to connect with the past in a meaningful way.

When an artifact seamlessly integrates into a story, it becomes more than just an object. It takes on a life of its own, imbued with meaning and emotion by the narrative. It adds a layer of authenticity and believability, drawing the reader deeper into the world of the story. (Mobius 2024, 6)

In this context, McDougal’s focus on tangible objects not only serves to preserve the memory of those involved in the war but also reinforces the authenticity of his narrative. By creating a space where these artifacts can be viewed and appreciated, he emphasizes the importance of remembering and honoring the contributions of all who fought:

Brock’s coat, bullets and buttons and cannon-balls....And endless scarlet uniforms, empty, no dummies propping them up. Maps, autographs, commission signed by famous generals [and] copies of great speeches given by men approaching battle. (Urquhart 1993, 173)

In short, Urquhart employs artifacts to bolster the factuality of her narrative about the War of 1812, allowing it to stand firm against the colonial record. Whether supported by

eyewitness accounts or material evidence, these historical events in the novel become more reliable, particularly for Canadians who are seeing their contributions to the war acknowledged for the first time.

The Whirlpool raises the question of who holds the authority to narrate stories about the past: historians, novelists, or both. This brings to mind novelist David Malouf's assertion in an interview that history is not merely about past events, but rather about what is written about those events. According to Malouf, "History is not what happened but what is told" (Attar, 1989). Thus, history, in his view, refers to writing about an event, rather than the event itself. Consequently, all writings that address past events can be considered a form of history. In this sense, the narrative of the War of 1812 in *The Whirlpool* should be understood as a historical account presented through fiction.

Until the second half of the last century, Canadians primarily relied on history books to grasp their country's past. However, their focus gradually shifted toward novels for this understanding. Charlotte Gray explains this transition, saying:

Since the 1970s, both non-fiction in general and history in particular have been in a slump, elbowed to the margins by the glamorization of fiction...general non-fiction is still fighting for survival, but well-narrative history is on the comeback trail. (2003, 8)

Gray deduces that literary texts are now prioritized by those seeking an unbiased account of the past. Researchers need to examine more novels to explore new stories that have been absent in national records.

Conclusion

In *The Whirlpool*, Jane Urquhart utilizes the critical ideas of the theory of post-colonialism to rewrite the narrative of the War of 1812, challenging the colonial record that characterizes the conflict as a British-American war. The novel offers a fresh perspective that highlights the contributions of Canadians who fought in the war. It demonstrates that literary texts, particularly novels, can address and correct the oversights in historical accounts that often overlook the contributions of colonized and marginalized groups in historical events. Even when infused with the author's creativity, novels can contain significant truths about the past, complementing other forms of historical writing.

Urquhart's perspective on the War of 1812, therefore, is markedly different from that of the colonizers, emphasizing the war as a pivotal moment in the fight for Canadian sovereignty. Thus, the Canadian contribution to the War of 1812 represents a purely patriotic stance, a fight not for colonial masters, but for their own identity and future.

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