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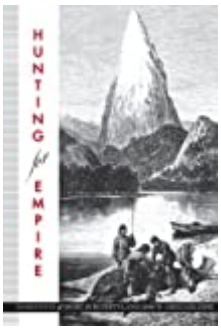


**Greg Gillespie.** *Hunting for Empire: Narratives of Sport in Rupert's Land, 1840-70.* Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2007. xxvii + 172 pp. $93.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7748-1354-9.

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## Sport Hunting in Canada: The Imperial Connection

In todayâs world of electronic media saturation and increasingly urbane lifestyle choices, it is difficult to imagine that just a century ago sport hunting was one of the dominant social and cultural institutions among middle- to upper-class men through much of the English-speaking world. More than just a pastime, sport hunting–with its rigid code of ethics, its fascination with exotic landscapes and fauna, and its disdain for indigenous hunting practices–became one of the most important agents and symbols of the British imperial project as it spread its tentacles throughout the world. Since the publication of John Mackenzieâs *The Empire of Nature: Hunting, Conservation, and British Imperialism* (1988) two decades ago, historians and geographers have developed a huge body of literature that expands on this relationship between sport hunting and imperialism in such colonized territories as Africa and South Asia. A more recent body of scholarly work by Louis Warren, Karl Jacoby, Bill Parenteau, and Tina Loo has examined colonial attitudes and practices among sport hunters toward the indigenous people and poor homesteaders who inhabited the hinterland regions of Canada and the United States.

So much has been said about sport hunting and imperialism that one might be forgiven for concluding that the proverbial well has run dry on this theme. But Greg Gillespieâs *Hunting for Empire* deals with a largely ignored time period and location: the vast territory in Canada north and west of Ontario (known as Rupertâs Land while under control of the Hudson Bay Company prior to Confederation), where British imperial hunters traveled, wrote, and pursued big game in relatively large numbers between 1840 and 1870. Gillespieâs work is also unique in that it is avowedly interdisciplinary, eschewing a narrative or biographical account in favor of a close reading of sport huntersâ popular writings. Gillespieâs work thus straddles the line between history and literary criticism; his subject matter is both a reconstruction of the past as well as a thematic reading of the imperial tropes that weave their way through the sport-hunting narratives set in Rupertâs Land.

Gillespie begins with a discussion of what he terms

the âprefatory paradox,â a narrative strategy whereby big game hunters claimed at the outset of their writings to be at once very close to the events they describe (with the author as protagonist providing firsthand legitimacy to the events described), but also distanced enough from the environment that their observations take on the objective authority of the natural scientist. He then moves to a detailed examination of the sportsmanâs moral code, a complex web of edicts ranging from a prohibition on excess slaughter to a preference for stalking game (as opposed to baiting or herding animals). The third chapter is devoted to the sport hunterâs evocation of science, natural history, and the collecting of specimens as a means to legitimize their killing of exotic animals in distant lands. Finally, Gillespie argues that sport-hunting narratives set in Rupertâs Land continually evoked British landscape conventions, such as the sublime or the picturesque, as a means to assert ownership and control over the distant corners of the empire. Throughout the volume, Gillespie illustrates his basic themes with astute and very close readings of popular hunting narratives produced by sporting luminaries, including William Ross King, John Guille Millais, and James Carnegie.

Taken together, Gillespieâs somewhat disparate chapter themes coalesce into an evocative and fascinating study of the interplay between sport hunting and imperialism in the mid-nineteenth century. Indeed, Gillespie is at his strongest when he applies his basic themes to the specific ways that sport hunting acted as an imperial agent. The chapter on the sportsmanâs code, for instance, contains an excellent discussion of the disdain elite British hunters harbored for indigenous hunters, an attempt to discredit indigenous material cultures and make them subject to imperial norms and values. In ecological terms, the hunter-naturalists of the nineteenth century also advocated quasi-scientific programs of acclimatization (the intentional introduction of alien species) as a means to colonize foreign environments to the benefit of the sport hunter (and possibly to the detriment of aboriginal people who depended on native wildlife for their survival). For Gillespie, sport hunters were not one-dimensional historical figures bent merely on exploiting game as a form of recreation; they also played a significant role at the vanguard of the imperial apparatus as the explorers, surveyors, and mapmakers who laid a claim to the margins of Britainâs growing empire.

There are some readers who will chafe at Gillespieâs thematic analysis of his subject. The discussion is certainly nuanced, as Gillespie rejects the oversimplifications of Edward Saidâs O*rientalism* (1979) (with its emphasis on othering and the exotic) in favor of David Cannadineâs *Ornamentalism: How the British Saw Their Empire* (2001) and its discussion of how the British imperial mind fetishized what was out of the ordinary *and also* what bore a resemblance to the mother country (hence the application of British landscape ideals as an act of possession in the colonies). Yet despite this relatively novel use of theory, one who has read deeply in the international literature on sport hunting and colonialism may, at times, find the discussion a bit shopworn. Have we not met before the sport hunter posing as a credible natural scientist? Has not the discussion of European notions of sublime and picturesque landscapes been repeated time and time again in the international literature? Has not the sportsmanâs code been analyzed many times in terms of its deep reflection of elite values? This sense of repetition is augmented by the fact that Gillespie self-consciously limited himself to a relatively small number of sources (a mere two-page bibliography of primary sources), concentrating instead on the application of theoretical work from deconstructionist and postcolonial schools of thought to his main subject matter. As a historian, I suppose I was also looking for the extensive archival study that has become increasingly identified as the marker of originality in historical works (even if theoretical analysis is paltry or nonexistent), rather than a derivative approach that relies heavily on secondary theoretical works to provide context and coherence to the narrative.

One should not push such criticism too far, however, for to do so risks imposing a singular methodology and narrative approach on all historical works. Even though Gillespieâs book is avowedly non-archival in method and scope, it provides an eloquent and astute reading of an extremely important manifestation of British imperial popular culture in the nineteenth century. Beautifully written and argued, *Hunting for Empire* is an important addition to the global literature on hunting and imperialism in a largely unexamined time and place (though George Colpitts's excellent *Game in the Garden: A Human History of Wildlife in Western Canada to 1940* [2002] also covers some of the same ground in terms of period and region). The book is a must-read for anyone interested in the history of sport, westward expansion in Canada, landscape aesthetics in the Prairies and the Rocky Mountains, and the application of British imperial thought in Canada. Gillespie has successfully reclaimed the sport hunter as a significant actor in early (i.e., pre-Confederation) colonialism in western Canada, one who

must be considered alongside the more well-known early agents of exploration and expansion, such as miners and fur traders.