

Gilbert Imlay: Citizen of the World. By WIL VERHOEVEN. London: Pickering and Chatto, 2008. 313 pages. \$99.00 (cloth).

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Gilbert Imlay was, literary critic E. F. Wyatt wrote on the eve of the Great Depression, “a man of enlightenment beyond his age.” That ambiguous tribute was the best thing Wyatt could say about Imlay in a cascade of descriptors that included “unscrupulous,” “a dodger of debts,” and “a greedy and treacherous land booster.” Wil Verhoeven acknowledges that “Imlay was all of these [things] and more” (1). That Verhoeven’s tenacious effort to recover Imlay’s mostly obscure but briefly incandescent life—while separating it from its intersection with that of Mary Wollstonecraft, which gave Imlay his fifteen minutes of American fame—coincides with a market failure that some economists are comparing with the Depression is relevant and ironic. Imlay’s immersion in a frontier land rush after the American Revolution was both a training ground and a point of entrée to the more complex currents of profiteering and fraud swirling around in revolutionary France. Where Wollstonecraft discerned in Imlay’s florid visage “tender looks [that give] lustre to your eye,” the *real* animating spirit lying beneath was probably more a perpetual and barely contained “irrational exuberance” than amour.¹ Ultimately, Verhoeven provides a well-documented and reasonably nuanced interpretation of Imlay’s character and experience.

Even with gaps in the chronological record of Imlay’s peripatetic life and a few rough-edged transitions, this book will enlighten readers. Verhoeven, a professor of American Studies in the Netherlands, is as adept an archival researcher as he is a practitioner of cultural analysis. With a keen eye for detail, he paints Imlay as a native of proprietary New Jersey who practiced “reverse transatlantic emigration” (5) before dying on the Channel Island (Jersey) that gave the American colony its curious Latinate name; as a clueless provincial adventurer who skunked the cunning Daniel Boone on a Kentucky land deal; as a committed libertarian who cruelly invested in an Atlantic slaving voyage; and as an unschooled rustic who published successively a best-selling geographic guide to the American frontier and a widely read “Jacobin” novel.

It would be unfair to call this work less a biography than a book of essays, but Imlay’s fractured life compels Verhoeven to adapt different scholarly tools to its various parts. The first chapter is an exercise in

¹ Mary Wollstonecraft to Gilbert Imlay, [Dec. 30, 1793], in Ralph M. Wardle, ed., *Collected Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1979), 240 (“tender looks”).

genealogy and cultural geography. The Imlays were part of a wave of seventeenth-century Scottish migrants to coastal New Jersey who leavened the Dutch cultural character of the Hudson River plateau and the English Quaker cast of the Delaware Valley. By the time Imlay was born in 1754, his father, Peter, was engaging in modest land speculations. In 1772 Peter married the widowed daughter-in-law of a member of the colony's provincial council, but Gilbert enjoyed few stabilizing advantages from such upward mobility. He grew up in a colony that was buffeted in the 1750s by the Seven Years' War, then shattered socially and politically when it became the cockpit of the American Revolution. Gilbert Imlay's closest relatives mostly sided with the rebels. He served briefly in the Continental army as a paymaster, undoubtedly learning about "paper" economies. As the active campaign moved south in 1778–79, Verhoeven concludes, Imlay was "drawn into the maelstrom of wartime racketeering and rogue trading" (30) left in its wake.

1780 opened a period in Imlay's life when his exact physical location is hard to determine, except by the trail of lawsuits, writs, and warrants it generated. He was in Philadelphia after its evacuation by British forces in 1778, but by late 1783 he was in Kentucky reinventing himself as a land speculator. For three years Imlay traversed the frontier, with occasional trips back to the coastal hearth, enacting the Zelig-like figure that was becoming common in the early Republic. Verhoeven compares the challenge of tracking him to "trying to prove the existence of a black hole . . . by observing the movement of satellites orbiting him" (3). This is a mixed metaphor, but the task indeed requires the instincts of an astronomer and a paleontologist. Some expressive writings by actors whom Imlay knew in Kentucky survive, but most of the evidence Verhoeven assembles comes from obdurate, fossil-like strata of court dockets, pleadings, and legal agreements. In these we see the neophyte Imlay besting the midcareer Boone; wheeling and dealing with veteran frontier operators such as William Clark and George Rogers Clark; transacting with members of the ubiquitous Lee family of Virginia; and nurturing ties with that prototype of the early American intriguer, James Wilkinson. Many of Imlay's western associates lost money on their dealings with him, but Verhoeven produces no evidence that Imlay made much money. Anything he set aside he lost investing in a 1786 trading voyage to the African coast to bring slaves to the West Indies or to the Carolinas. That venture failed disastrously, "clos[ing] the legal net" (90) around Imlay, and by late 1787 he had fled to England.

Verhoeven begins a chapter on Imlay's exile by observing that "it is hard to imagine that the Gilbert Imlay who had . . . departed from the United States in . . . 1787 was the same [man] who appeared in the full

public glare of London's periodical press" (93) in 1792 as an expert on the American frontier. He opens the next chapter by noting that Imlay's reinvention as a "writer of political-sentimental fiction was at first sight an even more startling metamorphosis" (123). His skillful analysis of Imlay's works—*A Topographical Description of the Western Territory of North America* (1792) and *The Emigrants* (1793)—shows this paradox abundantly, but neither chapter does very much to actually *explain* the question of Imlay's capacity for transformation.

Instead these chapters showcase Verhoeven's skill at textual analysis. While Imlay remained a speculator, Verhoeven argues that his *Topographical Description* was less a real-estate prospectus than an intervention in embryonic British debates about the French Revolution. It is impossible to briefly summarize his analysis, but Verhoeven notes that the book "reformulated the prevailing mode of topography/travel writing into an ideological discourse of space" and shifted the subject "semantic[ally] and paradigmatic[ally]"—from 'wilderness' into 'territory' and from the West as trans-Alleghenian 'land' into the West as the space for the establishment of an alternative, Jacobin American 'empire'" (95). *The Emigrants* "puts into fictional form the ideological concerns of the *Topographical Description*, although its underlying ideology of reform is more radical" (126). When France declared war on Britain in 1793, Imlay's novel was drawn into a critical struggle between conservative allies of Edmund Burke and the radical friends of William Godwin and Thomas Paine. Verhoeven nicely summarizes these debates, with an important aside for Americanists on links between Imlay's political intentions and his old partner Wilkinson's intrigues to separate the interior West from the United States.

What we do not learn in these chapters is anything about Imlay's life in Britain between arriving there in 1787 and leaving for France in 1792. This may reflect the fact that Imlay "was seldom where he said he would be, and when he was, [he] would not be there for long" (3). Given the confined and densely populated spaces of Britain and Verhoeven's acute research skills, however, even a conjectural account of his British activities would better connect the American speculator with the figure who gained lucrative access to the drawing rooms, countinghouses, and ministerial offices of revolutionary Paris. How did Imlay support himself in Britain? How did he arrive in Paris with a letter of introduction from Thomas Cooper, the radical chemist whose book, *Some Information Respecting America*, contemporaries viewed as the rival to the *Topographical Description* as the essential guide for European radicals to the American frontier? In Paris Imlay resumed his ideological and economic opportunism. He promoted a scheme for the Girondist government to seize

the trans-Appalachian West. When the plan failed with the rise of the Jacobins, Imlay cultivated the latter and became an important smuggler of goods needed for the survival of the revolution itself. In these accounts the archival skills that Verhoeven honed in Kentucky allow him to excavate from opaque records complex projects involving the extraction from France of silver ingots melted down from confiscated religious and aristocratic household artifacts to purchase commodities such as food, salt, potash, and gunpowder.

This project leads us to the formidable problem of Wollstonecraft. Verhoeven's hope to reclaim Imlay from the one-dimensional villainous role he plays in most biographies of Wollstonecraft is understandable. He reasonably argues that she and Imlay had very different degrees of personal commitment to each other from the outset and that she did not accept this. He suggests that despite her formulaic condemnations of commercialism, her active participation in his arcane mercantile projects predated her trip to Scandinavia to salvage one of those deals.

But it seems mean and more than a bit naïve to conclude that the "entire sad tale of [the] affair" between the two was "very much part of *her* biography, rather than his" (177). Verhoeven portrays Wollstonecraft as an almost stereotypical emotionally uncontrolled woman: "too old for the marriage market" (177); fleeing to France from the "fiasco of [a] platonic relationship" (178); already "fantasizing about an idyllic life on a farm in America" (180); depressed and "delusion[al]," or even "suffer[ing] from erotomania" (184). Imlay, meanwhile, gamely goes about his dark businesses, although he temporarily "buckle[s]" (200) under her pressure to resume cohabitation, if not quite copulation.

This barrage of clichés establishes distance between the author's subject and the far-better-known (and more accomplished) Wollstonecraft, but one has to wonder at what cost to Verhoeven's own interpretive purposes. Verhoeven acknowledges that Imlay's brief relationship with her offers one of the few occasions when there is a coherently articulated documentary record of his life. Disagreement with the uses other scholars have put that record to does not make it advisable to so thoroughly discredit its author, who can serve as a useful witness for a wide range of subjects.

As Wollstonecraft is defined as something like a stalker, Imlay once again becomes trackable only by the more visible activity of others. For a while he nearly vanishes from his own biography while a proxy actor drives the story. Arguing that Imlay was almost a "shadow" to the American land agent Joel Barlow, Verhoeven reconstructs Barlow's course from Hartford, Connecticut, to France in 1788 and then back and forth between Paris and London with a dexterity that makes one miss similar

treatment of Imlay during the same years. Imlay finally emerges as Barlow's "loyal agent," and the story of blockade-running adventure resumes.

Such critiques can be multiplied unproductively. Anyone who has tried to recover the life of an obscure (if notorious) figure such as Imlay knows the difficulty of doing that job as well as Verhoeven has done here. Imlay may be condemned to remain an unfinished figure, to be filled in by the ongoing work of other scholars. The author is especially adept at weaving complex empirical reconstruction of mundane circumstances with narrative and with the incisive analysis of thick textual materials. The comparative case that comes readily to mind is Alan Taylor's account of William Cooper. Cooper and Imlay were both born in 1754 within thirty miles of each other. Their families moved even closer together as their adult ambitions took one north and the other west from the Delaware Valley. Both struggled as land speculators but were as attracted to the heady pleasures of theorizing the frontier in print as they were to the arcane mechanics of land brokerage. In 1800, while an aging Imlay languished as a London grocer, Cooper's vivacious and talented daughter, Hannah, conducted a brief platonic flirtation with Imlay's kinsman, the Federalist congressman James H. Imlay from New Jersey. Her tragic death a few months later spared her the choice between marriage with James Imlay, or with several other ambitious American politicians, and her inclination not to marry at all. Perhaps she had read Godwin's recent account of the end of the affair between Wollstonecraft and Imlay—a quite different one than Verhoeven furnishes. If more marginal members of this "long Revolutionary generation" received biographical treatment, we would better understand the odd Atlantic world of which they—as well as Imlay—were citizens.²

² Alan Taylor, *William Cooper's Town: Power and Persuasion on the Frontier of the Early American Republic* (New York, 1995), 303–13; William Godwin, *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 2d ed. (London, 1798), chap. 8.