

# Geography, Topography, Infrastructure: Mapping the Oscillations of the Frontier in John Buchan's *Prester John* (1910)

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## *Abstract*

*This paper develops a conceptual map of 'frontier consciousness', outlining this ideological perspective that gave shape to a strand of Britain's imperial relationship with South Africa at the turn of the twentieth century. It does so through an application of world-systems theory to the textual 'mappings' of John Buchan's frontier novel, Prester John (1910). Frontier consciousness comes into being through its proximity to the unknown spaces of the discursive African interior and its distance from the imperial metropole. But in the very process of describing these unknown spaces they necessarily become known: frontier consciousness, as articulated and mapped by Buchan's novel, has thus to continuously produce and re-produce new unknown geographical areas in order to maintain the binary simplicity that allows it to come into being ('civilisation' vs. 'savagery' and so on). It is caught in a constant production of spatial distance and the simultaneous need to become proximal to it. The article concludes by arguing that this understanding of frontier consciousness, underpinned by notions of distance and proximity, can be mapped onto the historic and socioeconomic expansion and accumulation of capital that was taking place at this point in Britain's imperial history.*

Keywords: John Buchan, *Prester John*, frontier, South Africa, world-systems

In his autobiography, *Memory Hold-the-Door*, written in 1940, also the year of his death, John Buchan looks back on his time in South Africa with nostalgia. He had returned there only once in May 1905 after working under Alfred Milner's government in the aftermath of the Anglo-Boer War between 1901 and 1903. Nevertheless, he invests the peripheral South African landscape with a broader, redemptive ideological function for the industrialised and increasingly urbanising metropolitan centres in Britain. 'Those were wonderful years for me, years of bodily and mental activity, of zeal and hope not yet dashed by failure', he recalls (Buchan 1940a:110-111), going on to note, however, that 'it is the land itself which holds my memory' (115). South Africa becomes, for Buchan, a 'Borderland', a geographical imagining that facilitates what this article terms the 'frontier consciousness' running through and articulated in his first novel, *Prester John*, set in South Africa and published in 1910, on the eve of the country's union. As Buchan writes in his autobiography: 'A hundred Johannesburgs would not change the country's character. It seems not to take the impress of man'; he configures South Africa as a rural space invested with the 'means of giving to the congested masses at home open country instead of blind alley' (116-117). Buchan's imagination of the South African frontier produces a geography that can, he tells us, absorb 'a hundred Johannesburgs' — zones of industrialisation and urbanisation produced by the infiltration and expansion of capital — without running out of 'open country'.

Turning to a speech that Buchan delivered on 24th October 1907, at a time when he was working on the short segments of romance fiction that would eventually become *Prester John*, we can see how his conceptions of the romance as a literary genre were playing out at a social and political level. In this passage he draws on the socioeconomic and physical implications of an infrastructural presence in direct relation to his conception of a romanticised, or 'empty', frontier landscape, and thereby combining the economic benefits of emigration to the colonies with the contemporaneous rhetoric of the imperial romance:

These new countries give a man a horizon and an ideal which he may not be able to find at home. He has his chance, and the look-out ahead for him is not a lifetime spent in working at small wages, for others. [...] The emigrant has *romance* in his life, for he knows there is the chance of the unforeseen, and this chance puts enterprise and ambition into men [...] It is as the residuary remedy for social disorders that we must advocate it, and it is a remedy which must be increasingly used if both the Mother Country and the outlying Empire are to remain in *social and economic* health. [My emphases.] (Buchan 1940b: 127-128)

In 1902, just a few years before Buchan's speech, J.A. Hobson had defined imperialism as 'the use of the machinery of government by private interests, mainly capitalists, to secure for them economic gains outside their country' (Hobson 94). Hobson's geographic and economic understanding of imperialism was developed with more theoretical and methodological complexity by Vladimir Lenin in 1933:

Unevenness and irregularity in the development of individual enterprises, individual branches of industry, and individual countries, are inevitable under the capitalist system. [...] As long as capitalism remains capitalism, surplus capital will never be used for the purpose of raising the standard of living of the masses, for this would mean decrease in profits for the capitalists; instead it will be used to increase profits by exporting the capital abroad, to backward countries. In these backward countries profits are usually high, for capital is scarce, the price of land is relatively low, wages are low, raw materials are cheap. (57-8)

Lenin understands 'imperialism' as 'the highest stage of capitalism', its appetite for maximal profits consequentially driving economic threads of the system abroad that in turn bind, in an albeit uneven and irregular process, external geographical areas into its cross-national economic system. Lenin's theory invokes what another early-twentieth-century anti-imperialist, Rosa Luxemburg, described in 1913, as 'accumulation'. For Luxemburg, this geographically expansive process of 'accumulation' was integral to 'feeding' a capitalist metabolism, a relationship that was enacted not *within* the capitalist system but *between* capitalist and pre- or non-capitalist socioeconomic forms of organisation. The accumulation of capital, she wrote, drawing on the specific historical context of South Africa to which Buchan's novel is also a response, thus 'corrodes and assimilates'; it depends upon the 'continuous and progressive disintegration of non-capitalist organisations' (Luxemburg 397-398). It follows, therefore, that this depends on the continuous *presence* of non-capitalist zones, or areas, into which capital can expand.

Taking these contemporaneous theoretical understandings of imperialism into account, we can begin to map Buchan's frontier consciousness, as sketched through the plot and narrative of *Prester John*, onto them. The novel is narrated in the first person perspective of its protagonist, Davie, who leaves Britain to make his fortune in South Africa. He goes to work for a trading company in a remote outpost in the North-Easterly most region of South Africa where he stumbles across a black uprising, led by a 'black priest' called Laputa, that is seeking to expel white imperialism from the region. Davie becomes embroiled in the military suppression of this rebellion, ultimately securing the landscape as a redemptive space for British settler colonialists and opening up its resources for imperial extraction. However, despite the novel's somewhat predictable, if forced, ideological resolution, throughout the novel, Davie's frontier consciousness is plagued by a tension between distance and proximity, as he continuously seeks to move beyond into new conceptual and geographical spaces. These movements can be mapped onto the cross-national modes of production that define the materialist understandings of imperialism outlined above. By further combining these insights with a world-systems analysis of the infrastructural networks—the physical manifestations of empire and cross-national trade—that run through the novel, it becomes possible to read Davie's geographical oscillation between being distant from and proximal to them as a textual manifestation of the economic tensions underpinning the expansion of global capital.

In his introduction to world-systems analysis, Immanuel Wallerstein asks us to 'note the hyphen in world-system and its two subcategories, world-economies and world-empires' because the object of analysis is, in fact, not a 'social whole', but rather 'a spatial/temporal zone which cuts across many political and cultural units' (Wallerstein 2004 16-17). Likewise, *Prester John's* productions of South Africa's geographical space are, despite the text's professions to cartographic accuracy and its characters' constant recourse to maps and other spatially enabling technologies (compasses, field-glasses, and so on), necessarily incomplete. *Prester John* produces what Henri Lefebvre calls 'representational spaces', cartographic productions that 'overlay physical space, making symbolic use of its objects' (Lefebvre 38-40). In the landscape of the frontier, defined by the paradigmatic confrontation between some sort of self and some sort of other (in the novel's terms, for example, 'white civilization' and 'black barbarism'), the space that is generated, read, mapped and understood repeatedly makes use of the most immediately obvious symbolic structures that it has to hand: physical infrastructures, the embodiments of imperial presence and the physical determinants of a specific socioeconomic system. However, these infrastructures are simultaneously cast in a direct, albeit spatial, opposition to zones beyond their control as they progress and expand unevenly through the novel's South African landscape.

It is curious, then, that Davie, the novel's central protagonist, exhibits an ambivalent attitude towards these infrastructural routes, one that recurs throughout *Prester John*. He repeatedly uses them to map and chart his progress through the South African landscape, whilst simultaneously concluding that to travel along these routes themselves is *too* dangerous — a danger attributed, at different times and with varying frequency, to a number of factors, such as the vulnerability of being subject to surveillance, being tracked or traced, and so on. As Davie comments, 'I would suddenly be conscious, as I walked on the road, that I was being watched', later reflecting that he 'must get off the road. [...] it was only wise to leave the track which I would be assumed to have taken' (Buchan 2008 34, 127-8). Davie's geographical location throughout *Prester John*, so often in sight of, but never actually deep within, the infrastructural networks that constitute a British imperial presence in the novel's depiction of South Africa, itself enacts the complex ideological nexus of frontier consciousness. Davie needs to have access to, at all times, the symbolic cartographies of empire that are enabled by those infrastructural objects. But he also always needs to be able to move beyond them. This spatial dichotomy — a constant desire to move outwards that pulls against a conflictual and ever-present need to return, or look back, to that which is expanded beyond — generates a tension that dominates Davie's frontier consciousness. It is this tension of uneven oscillation between distance and proximity that, this article argues, can be mapped onto Luxemburg's formulation of capital accumulation.

This tension is not static, but rather oscillates as the narrative progresses, throwing Davie back and forth as his attitude shifts in relation to his geographical location. During his initial travel away from Britain, Davie suffers acutely from 'the loneliness of an exile' (Buchan 2008 15); when he reaches his 'final landing in Africa' he has 'lost every remnant of homesickness' (23); but then, located in his frontier trading station, and suspicious of some

sort of anti-imperial activity in the region, he longs ‘miserably for the places where white men were thronged together in dorps and cities’ (60), tying his emotional response not only to a racial and cultural familiarity but *also* to an infrastructural one. Then, after escaping Laputa’s imprisonment, in which he has been trapped for over two chapters, with the exclamation, ‘At last I was free’, rather than retreat to the safety of the British imperial military lines, he does ‘the craziest thing of all. [...] I started running back the road we had come’ (125-126). The plot continues similar degrees of inconsistency, perpetually shifting back and forth between an ideological commitment to the extension of empire by traversing its frontiers, and an overwhelming desire to be relocated *back* within the safety of its infrastructural networks. Davie acknowledges this inconsistency himself, as he comments, towards the narrative’s climactic scene, ‘I was now as eager to get back into danger as I had been to get into safety’ (167).

Davie is thus trapped on a relational slope that teeters back and forth depending upon his proximity to the infrastructural networks that have brought him into contact with, removed him from, and positioned him within, the borderland of the frontier. It’s helpful to understand this through Wallerstein’s world-systems terminology, though with an important translocation. Wallerstein uses the terminologies ‘core’ and ‘periphery’ to describe the interrelation between economic modes of production that define ‘the axial division of labor’ in a ‘capitalist world-economy’. These must here be transposed into an understanding of the ‘core’ as a site of production of, or investment in, symbolic capital—the consolidation of various imperial infrastructures as the objects that give shape to the novel’s symbolic cartography (Wallerstein 2004 17; Wallerstein 2011 30-32). The point is that these two arenas of symbolic capital—core and periphery—between which the novel oscillates, require each other’s presence to come into being; or rather, they come into being through their relationship with one another. Davie locates his fictional frontier outpost, Blaauwildebeestfontein, through the spatial referent of the ‘railroad’ located on the ‘map’, from which it is ‘not above ninety miles’; this locates the frontier in relation to an infrastructural demarcation, whilst also placing it, as Mr Wardlaw, Davie’s companion, explains, ‘in the heart of native reserves’, somewhere that ‘sounds like a place for adventure’ (Buchan 2008 16-17).

Although making a theoretical split by translating Wallerstein’s map of an economic world-system into a methodological paradigm that can be used to make sense of a cultural one, the text of *Prester John* itself sutures these two divided spheres back together. In fact, the text works hard to draw attention to the socioeconomic determinants that justify the creation and expansion of infrastructural networks, as well as Davie’s own presence on the frontier, in the first place. Mr Wardlaw’s comments on Blaauwildebeestfontein are revealing: ‘You’ll exploit the pockets of the black men and I’ll see what I can do with their minds’ (17). Wardlaw makes the division between two dimensions of imperial expansion: the transmission of the ‘civilising’ imperial culture and the enmeshing of pre-capitalist economies into the emerging cross-national network of Britain’s world-empire. But the text of *Prester John* encompasses them both as a whole, consolidating them into one imperial project as a mutually substantive enterprise. If anything, the narrative prioritises economic

determinants as the prime motor driving the expansion of the imperial frontier. This is worked out through the metonymic vehicle of Davie himself: Davie's job is, his uncle tells him, at the very beginning of Chapter 2 (which is indicatively entitled, 'Furth! Fortune!'), 'to be assistant storekeeper' for 'one of the biggest trading and shipping concerns in the world'; 'It lies with you [Davie] to open up new trade among the natives' (13-15). Davie thus arrives at the frontier as an embodied representative of, and as an outermost link to, a global infrastructural and explicitly cross-national network that is sustained by a capitalist world-system. On his arrival, he immediately sets about enmeshing the local populations and socioeconomic systems into a global system of core and peripheral modes of production: there are new markets that he is keen to tap into (the 'countryside was crawling with natives'), and numerous products 'which I foresaw', Davie notes, 'could be worked up into a profitable export' (30).

Davie's identity as a representative of global capital is vocalised not only through figures within this cross-national network, but also by those beyond it — primarily, in fact, by Laputa himself, the rebellious black priest who brings the frontier into being and who, like Davie, is so often located at its boundary. Laputa repeatedly calls Davie not by his name, but by the role he is playing as a representative of this broader economic system: 'It is the storekeeper', says Laputa, when he first sees Davie (110), and he continues to refer to Davie as 'Mr Storekeeper' right up until a narrative moment in which a transaction passes between them, and Davie, in fact, lives up to the title Laputa has been so determined to bestow upon him. Paradoxically, Laputa thus helps to bring Davie, as a trader and representative of the capitalist world-system, into being. We find the relational axis of periphery and core occurring through the novel even at this level of characterisation. But the scene of this transaction is especially illuminating:

'Now see here, Mr Laputa,' I said. 'I am going to talk business. Before you started this rising, you were a civilised man with a good education. [...] I am going to make you a fair and square business proposition. [...] I offer to trade with you. Give me my life, and I will take you to the place and put the jewels in your hand. Otherwise you may kill me, but you will never see the collar of John again.'

I still think that was a pretty bold speech for a man to make in a predicament like mine. But it had its effect. Laputa ceased to be the barbarian king, and talked like a civilised man. (152)

Here the narrative enmeshes what, from this historical distance, might be understood as a simplistic division between base and superstructural motors of empire. What the text reveals is that these two stratas, at least within the ideological terrain out of which *Prester John* is carved, are in fact symbiotic, each one facilitating the other. At no other point in the text is the contrast between 'barbarian' and 'civilised man' drawn out so explicitly, spared right down to these reductive, though for the frontier necessary, binaries. In the moment that Laputa is drawn into the world-system his 'barbarian' attributes are quelled and he becomes 'civilised'. This occurs as Davie himself reaches the epitome of his metonymic representation of global capitalism: his own

life becomes commodified, taking on a valuation that he is then able to trade. However, as soon as Laputa receives his end of the deal—‘the jewels’—he ‘once more’ becomes ‘the savage transported in the presence of his fetich’ (162). For the narrative duration of the contract, the text has momentarily held the core and peripheral dynamics in mutual agreement and the violent oscillations that it has been attempting to navigate come to a momentary standstill. As soon as the contract is broken, however, the relational economy fails and begins to expand once again, accumulating that which lies beyond it and assimilating these spaces into its system.

Within the terms of the text’s overarching agenda, then, Laputa thus seals his own fate: if Buchan’s narrative is to realise the ideological resolution that it seeks — the ultimate conquering of the threat of the frontier and, as Robert MacDonald argues, the assimilation of the black population as primary producers of an industrial workforce into the global capitalist economy (MacDonald 212) — Laputa, the only black man in the whole novel who will not, it transpires, cooperate with the infiltrating capitalist economy, must be sealed far beyond the infrastructural networks that bring that very economy into being. And sure enough, in the novel’s penultimate chapter, he commits suicide, and his body is sealed in a peripheral geographical zone beyond the reach of the infrastructural world-system: ‘Far from human quest’, Davie comments, he now ‘sleeps his last sleep’ (Buchan 2008 190). Therefore, *Prester John* not only registers the relentless oscillations of frontier consciousness. It sub-textually alludes to the way in which this consciousness can and should be understood as a superstructural manifestation of much larger socioeconomic movements. These movements are, in turn, founded on a restless and productive tension between the distance from, and proximity to, the imperial centre and the frontiers of its cross-national economic and political networks. When read in this way, the novel undermines its own rhetoric of ‘civilisational values’ — a rhetorical strategy deployed by colonial discourse much more broadly — to gesture instead towards the expansion of global capital and its appetite for economic profit that underpinned these ideological justifications for the British Empire.

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### **Biography**

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