

Gilbert Imlay: Citizen of the World. By Wil Verhoeven. London: Pickering and Chatto, 2008.
xiii + 299pp. £60.00/\$99.00 (hb). ISBN 978 1 85196 579 3

Wil Verhoeven's comprehensive new biography seeks to expand our knowledge of Gilbert Imlay, best known as the faithless lover of Mary Wollstonecraft, and father of their daughter Fanny. Wollstonecraft, who was driven to attempt suicide by his indifference and infidelity, undertook her famous trip to Scandinavia in an attempt to rescue her lover's failing business interests; the wonderful *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark*, addressed to Imlay, were the result. Verhoeven's stated goal is to "correct and nuance" the traditional perception of Imlay as merely a faithless cad, an impression inevitably created by Wollstonecraft's heart-rending letters and the editorial intervention of William Godwin. Thus, this biography chronicles in detail Imlay's early career as a Revolutionary soldier and land-speculator in Kentucky; and paints an original portrait of a man whose addiction to speculation, and personal charm, briefly propelled him into the heart of the political and economic upheavals taking place on both sides of the Atlantic.

Imlay's actual mark in the documentary record is sparse, and for all of Verhoeven's diligent archival work, he remains a ghostly, intangible presence in much of this book; indeed, the author remarks that "writing this biography has been somewhat similar to trying to prove the existence of a black hole: more often than not, Imlay's presence and movements can only be established vicariously by observing the movements of satellites orbiting him." But what satellites they are. Imlay's greatest gift was his ability to ingratiate himself with the most influential and well-connected people in each social circle he inhabited. This extraordinary range of movement, both geographically and socially, in the midst of such a turbulent and complex period, provides ample opportunity for glancing aside at the great events and people

passing by; and the biography is marked by numerous extended digressions into these intersecting lives.

In the United States, amongst many others, Imlay did business with the legendary Kentucky pioneer Daniel Boone, and was intimately (and nefariously) involved with the notorious General James Wilkinson, and the Revolutionary war hero Colonel Henry ‘Light Horse Harry’ Lee (father of Robert E. Lee). Once his fraudulent activities had driven him to flee the US, Imlay emerged in London as a man of letters, apparently a political radical and expert on the American west, authoring *A Topographical Description of the Western Territory of North America* (1792) and arguably the first Jacobin novel, *The Emigrants* (1793). On the back of this success, Imlay moved to Paris, where he counted among his radical acquaintances Thomas Paine, Joel Barlow, General Francisco Miranda – and of course, Wollstonecraft, whom he met there. Imlay even became intimate with Brissot de Warville, for whose Girondist faction he concocted a clandestine plan to re-establish French control of Louisiana. Like most of Imlay’s schemes, it ultimately came to nothing.

Imlay’s early career as a land speculator in Kentucky is certainly little known, and Verhoeven patiently unravels the tangle of land purchases, contracts, promissory notes, and legal proceedings generated by Imlay’s affairs. These chapters are rather dry and involved, but reward the patient reader with a clearer sense of Imlay’s character: the legal mess left behind by Imlay when he fled to Europe in 1787 adumbrates his later European failures in love and business. His reinvention as a topographical expert, encouraging emigration to an American west from which he was exiled, seems both more ironic and more plausible.

Verhoeven gives the familiar story of Imlay and Wollstonecraft a new spin, making a convincing case for the fact that Imlay *never* had very much investment in the relationship, which always played second-fiddle to his gradually deteriorating business dealings. After reading the early chapters of the book, the alliance between this self-interested, opportunistic mercantilist and the idealistic Wollstonecraft seems more unlikely than ever; particularly given the revelation of Imlay's unsavoury (and unsuccessful) attempts to enter the slave trade shortly before leaving America. Verhoeven is notably non-judgemental, however; his deliberately neutral tone leaves the reader to draw their own conclusions about Imlay's mutable identity, repeated failures, and, one senses, increasing desperation.

Verhoeven's biography is highly readable and diligently researched, but doesn't deliver a radically different Imlay from the one I already knew—the additional detail puts flesh on the bones of the amoral opportunist who has featured in existing studies of Wollstonecraft, Godwin and their circle, or in histories of Kentuckian land-jobbing. Indeed, Imlay's manifest lack of integrity makes it hard to feel much sympathy for his slow slide into obscurity in the last three decades of his life (which remain largely mysterious). But despite this unsympathetic subject, the biography's subtitle—*Citizen of the World*—conveys its real appeal as a window on the Atlantic world in extraordinary times.

Rowland Hughes