

Mapping the Body of the Colonial Past

in Peter Carey's *Jack Maggs*

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## **Abstract**

In this paper, I examine Australia's historical relationship with Great Britain through a focus on colonial cartography, exploring this relationship through the lens of Peter Carey's novel *Jack Maggs*. For Carey, both Jack and Australia as a nation experienced trauma through colonialism, a trauma that Carey has suggested affects Australian identity in the present. The dynamics of colonial mapping that Carey brings to light in his novel prove to be pressing for contemporary Australian identity, both in literary and historical terms: Australia seeks to overcome negative perceptions of its convict history while Carey struggles with the literary legacy of English writer Charles Dickens. Both issues demand a careful reading of Australia's nineteenth century connections with Great Britain, and this aspect especially emerges in the intimate association between Tobias and Jack in *Jack Maggs*.

In one of the final confrontations between the characters Jack Maggs and Tobias Oates in Peter Carey's 1997 novel *Jack Maggs*, we learn that "[i]t had always been Tobias' method to approach his subject by way of the body" (p. 303). A writer, journalist, and amateur scientist, Tobias Oates, seeks to understand Jack Maggs – a convict sent to Australia – through the scientific and literary techniques widely popular in England in the first half of the nineteenth century. Jack's body has been tortured and traumatized through years as a convict, and it is of great interest for Tobias, who wants to map both Jack's mind and body to prove the existence of a "Criminal Mind" (p. 90). Tobias' declaration of being a cartographer highlights important intersections between mapping and colonial appropriation in the novel. Jack's body functions as a locus of concern about mapping in the convict colony of Australia, the growth of similar techniques to control urban development in England, and the place of the individual body and mind in the midst of such disquieting changes. Tobias appropriates Jack's story for personal and artistic gain – yet another example of colonial appropriation – while author Peter Carey looks at questions of how to enact responsibility in reading the (colonial) past as well as how to read other peoples' stories.

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