Mark Schoenfield[1]

reads

Living as an Author in the Romantic Period

(Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021)

by Matthew Sangster

IN AN ASTUTE PREFACE TO *Living as an Author in the Romantic Period*, Matthew Sangster contrasts post-romantic formulations of professional authorship with the emerging economic structures available to romantic writers. He sets the historical terms for his analysis by locating the limits of professionalism during the as-yet unstable and often unsustainable markets prior to the 1830s. Although Sangster does not discuss the poem, his study gives one more layer to William Wordsworth's "Michael" (the poem that substituted for Samuel Taylor Coleridge's incomplete "Christabel" in the second volume of *Lyrical Ballads*) as a meditation on poetic possibilities amid a complex and struggling British economy, which Michael, seeking to preserve his estate, ponders "Where every one is poor / What can be gained?" (lines 254–55).

No specific authors appear in Sangster's Table of Contents, signaling his commitment to situating authorship within the currents of social possibility and economic conditions; nonetheless, the individual chapters explore a wide range of authors (both male and female, and with precise and absorbing biographical detail) as they negotiated between their productions and their selves, and entered, re-entered, or failed to enter public discourse. Sangster's reading of the economic and aesthetic contours of romantic professionalism demonstrates its nascent formations and its reliance in prior forms, such as patronage, as well as its constrained and class-bound reach. He underscores how frequently authors depended not only on supplemental incomes but also on charity as a ground on which to build careers that were rarely or only intermittently self-sustaining. Further, he links this literary formation to the biographical reading habits of a developing public. Taking "intention" as a "basic assumption" of romantic reading, rather than as a "fallacy" (14), Sangster explores the struggles—tactical, strategic, often accidental or fortuitous—of professionalization as centrally thematic to romantic literary production. While Sangster avoids (and indeed problematizes the concept of) situating any individuals as representative, Coleridge's struggles are resonant: in his Introduction, Sangster details how Coleridge's letters to Francis Jeffrey, editor of the *Edinburgh Review*, demonstrate he "was deeply aware of the extent to which he was read into and out of his writings" and "performs" himself as "an individual with uncommon powers, uncommon problems and an uncommon ability to resist the blandishments of society" (17–18).

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[1] Mark Schoenfield is Professor of English at Vanderbilt University. He is the author of *The Professional Wordsworth: Law, Labor, and the Poet's Contract* and *British Periodicals and Romantic Identity: The "Literary Lower Empire,"* as well as coauthor, with Alec Jordan, of "Coleridge Among the Periodicals" in *Coleridge: Critical Readings*, edited by Denis Bonnecase.

This book brings together two strands of authorial production, the particularized "sociality" through which writers directed their lives toward their own authorship and canonical success, and the "conflicted twin developments of Romantic ideologies and technologies of mass production and circulation" (10). In doing so, Sangster weaves the complex interactions of emerging professionalism and anxious aesthetics. His work both contributes to the theorization of romantic authorship, in dialogue with works like Thomas Pfau's *Wordsworth's Profession* and Lee Erickson's *The Economy of Literary Form,* and engages with new biographical approaches such as Julian North's *Domestication of Genius: Biography and the Romantic Poet* and David Higgins's *Romantic Genius and the Literary Magazine: Biography, Celebrity, Politics.* These come together in Sangster's argument that, in contrast to the "implicit claim to disinterestedness" offered by "post-Romantic aesthetics," the "literary standing" of particular authors "often maps closely onto systems of social privilege." This argument is more nuanced than mere correlation, as Sangster's many examples demonstrate how a range of social positions have been mobilized toward literary success, yet the "most celebrated writers within the Romantic period were affluent and well-connected men" (11).

Sangster sets out three "overarching" reasons for the study of author's lives: the "pragmatic" one that "the lives of authors have been inscribed pervasively as contexts" for readers (8); that the "lives of authors" can "serve as a potent register of historical change"; and (in part a consequence of the two prior reasons) that the examination of writers' lives can help explicate canon formation—the ways in which "certain writers have been allowed to speak" while "others have been silenced" (11). These themes coalesce in the goal of drawing "out the social and economic consequences of the divergence between idealizing (and paranoid) conceptions of the power of writing and the grim realities of many writers' lives" (51). In a different register, Coleridge signals the precariousness of professional writing, using the language of chivalry to underscore, with valorizing overtones, the conceptualization of the amateur writer: "aspirant authors should 'Let literature be an honourable augmentation to your arms; but not constitute the coat, or fill the escutcheon!'"[2]

To avoid anachronistic imposition of aesthetic and professional structures, Sangster bases his study on "new archival evidence to recover the interlinked social and economic factors that determined the conditions for literary production and innovation in a period stretching from the 1790s to the 1820s" and to unearth the "crucial roles played by affiliation and networking" by a range of authors, and made available through a publishing and reviewing complex (13). Each of its six chapters explores a different position available to authors and agents of literary practice. The first chapter, "Publishers, Book Production and Profits," deploys the evidence of the Longman and Murray archives to detail the economic structures adumbrated by the contracts and correspondences between publishers and writers. Sangster notes that it was not

[2] Sangster, 24, quoting *BL* I, 229.

until the 1820s that crucial shifts in publication technologies occurred, which made "living by the pen a challenging but plausible career choice in the 1830s," at least for writers who could produce rapidly in keeping with the demands of magazine production (53). But for most of the writers Sangster explores, "these developments existed only as encouraging or worrying"—and sometimes unimagined—"future prospects" (53). Sangster notes that John Murray, interested in publishing William Herbert's *Helga* in 1815, offered the author three distinct models of distributing the risk: Herbert taking on all costs and profits; Murray accepting those costs and potential profits, and paying for the copyright (in this case 200 guineas); and Murray publishing at his own cost and splitting the profits, in this case evenly (59). Drawing on William St Clair's *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period*, Sangster catalogues various contracts between publishers and authors that used similar models (including the eventual payment of 150 guineas to print 2000 copies of *Helga* that Murray and Herbert eventually settled on), noting the role that the writer's financial and social position played in such negotiations and outcomes.

The second chapter, "Sociable Alignments," uses the letters of an array of authors to demonstrate that many writers sought social recognition and other forms of privileged access—some of which were monetizable—in a double-stranded set of communications. These private and public missives include the complex written interactions among Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Southey, and the consolidation imposed upon, and resisted by, them as the "Lake School." As Sangster notes, Southey wrote to Coleridge "Puff me, Coleridge! If you love me, puff me! Puff a couple of hundreds in my pocket!" (102). Such jocular begging, however, has a complex context within the letter Sangster cites: Southey has just acknowledged that "half the sales" of his briskly selling *"Espriella"* (the pseudonymous *Letters from England by Don Manuel Alvarez Espriella*) "must be attributed to puffs in the Courier," and yet the sale of a second edition would only "right me in Longman's books."[3] In addition, Southey's desire for puffing has an ironic, wider context, given Southey's review of *Lyrical Ballads*, about which Wordsworth opined to Joseph Cottle, Southey "knew that I published those poems for money and money alone … If he could not conscientiously have spoken differently of the volume, he ought to have declined the task of reviewing it."[4] These additional contexts for Southey's remark, although beyond Sangster's immediate concern, reinforce the salience of his approach to the entanglement of competitive and convivial friendship networks, for which he chooses the lesser-known and fascinating interplay of Elizabeth Hamilton and Mary Hays. Hay's review of Hamilton's first novel provokes an "indignant letter" by Hamilton and a chain of reactions—both private and public, novelistic and journalistic—and ultimately capitalized on by the *Anti-Jacobin Review*, which brings "Hays' private connections explicitly before the public in order to rejoice in Hamilton's

[3] Charles Cuthbert Southey, ed., *Life and Correspondence of Robert Southey*, VI vols. (London: Longman, 1850), III.134.

[4] Ernest de Selincourt, ed., Chester L. Shaver rev., *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth, Vol. 1: The Early Years 1787–1805* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1967), 267–68.

travesty" (100). To conclude the chapter, Sangster sketches several other friendship networks by tracing the correspondence of Leigh Hunt; of Matilda Betham, (particularly with George Dyer); and between Jane Porter and Mary Cockle.

In the third chapter, "Succeeding in 'the Worst Trade'," Sangster turns to "how a small number of authors were able to build potent literary reputations by paying keen attention to their culture's systems of affiliation and distinction" (121) and in the fourth, "The Working Writer," to writers who never secured economic stability. These chapters offer empirical studies of how writers constructed careers, some viable and some not, through a range of strategies, often seeking to synergize authorships with other public personae. Sangster's three primary examples of success, Robert Southey, Thomas Moore, and Felicia Hemans, "shared access to networks of influence that let them accrue the time and opportunities necessary to benefit seriously from authorship" (121). These examples offer telling cases for the value of biographical analysis supplemented by economic and publishing records, and suggest how each of these writers, as Sangster says of Hemans, "conjured herself as a key node in a sprawling network" (175), a formulation that opens their literary productions to new analysis going forward. In chapter four, Sangster uses the archives of the "Royal Literary Funds," founded by David Williams, to detail at once collective efforts at valorizing authorship and the many particular authors for whom such efforts failed. Given that some modicum of success is necessary for critical visibility, Sangster's method extends the literary terrain to include at least some whom, as Isaac D'Israeli put it, were "good enough to be praised, but not to sell" (180). Sangster focuses first on Robert Heron, whose extensive literary efforts are evident in a letter he writes to the Committee of the Literary Fund while confined in jail for debt (196), and then on Eliza Parsons, the story of whose fall from "affluence . . . with every prospect of happiness" to being "compelled by dire necessity to become an author" (206) somewhat echoes Charlotte Smith's more successful trajectory. Parsons's nineteen reviewed novels place her second to Smith for number of reviewed titles in the late eighteenth-century, yet even encouraging reviews did not sufficiently bolster sales or convert them into "social recognition" (212). Sangster notes the vicious cycle between her rapid writing (necessary to live off of sold copyrights) and complaints by reviewers and readers about her hasty composition, contrasting her production to the more careful pace Ann Radcliffe could manage because of her financial security (213–14). Sangster's final example, Robert Bloomfield, details a career caught among editors, patrons, and reviewers. Despite earning around 4,000 pounds from *The Farmer's Boy*, he found himself destitute (and hence the utility of the Literary Funds records) and his works critically dismantled by writers and critics protecting class privilege.

The final chapters, "The Oligarchs of Literature: Authority and the Quarterly Reviews" and "Refashioning Authorship's Purview" turn toward what many readers will consider more familiar territory: the tyranny and

topicality of the major quarterly reviews. Yet in the context of the fledgling professionalism of authorship that Sangster has developed, he explains how the quarterlies sought to regulate professionalism itself in modes consonant with their economic and political goals. On one hand, this process—backed by both financial and cultural capital—allowed reviewers to eclipse "the vast majority of those they reviewed in terms of readership, remuneration and influence" (233). On the other hand, such criticism—Sangster focuses on John Taylor Coleridge's reviews of P. B. Shelley and Henry Hart Milman—simultaneously mapped out public possibilities for authorship. The sixth chapter explores three of the period's most popular authors, Hannah More, Walter Scott, and Byron, highlighting their ability to mobilize the structure of reviewing to their own advantage and assessing the cultural impact of their successes. Sangster notes the continuity between More's "priorities" and those of "the wielder of elite systemic authority in her age" and contends that "her commitment to circulating narratives for moral purposes played a major role in enfranchising and educating a new generation of literary consumers" (273). Such enfranchisement coalesced with Scott's "model of authorship centred on productive industry, Protestant values and reconciliation through history," and Byron's "seductive countervailing model" of a "justified rebel" (273–74) to lay the groundwork for a more durable literary professionalism in the "second quarter of the nineteenth century" (274).

Sangster's coda is a rich and moving consideration of what romantic authors made possible without themselves achieving. It begins with a meditation on Wordsworth's 1834 "Extempore Effusions Upon the Death of James Hogg," a poem that "positions itself at the juncture between two literary eras" and offers itself as "a model for what will replace Coleridge's 'mortal power [. . .] frozen at its marvellous source'" (317–18). This moment chimes eerily with Sangster's discussion of Hazlitt's elegiac conclusion to his 1818 "On the Living Poets," where, after criticizing Coleridge's writing, Hazlitt names him the only person he "ever knew who answered to the idea of a man of genius"; as Sangster notes, "Coleridge lives in Hazlitt's memory not for his poetry but for his thoughts, conversation and way of being"; declaring him "irrevocably lost," Hazlitt grants Coleridge "a kind of authority based securely in the past" (328–29). If, as Sangster declares, Coleridge and the "canonical Romantic poets have haunted the margins of the previous chapters," the coda makes clear the continued place—made more interesting and complex by his expansive view of the era's literature, writers, and production—of their striving to create a public by which they could be enjoyed.