Sean Barry[1]
reads
Poetry and British Nationalisms in the Bardic Eighteenth Century: Imagined Antiquities
(Palgrave, 2018)
by Jeff Strabone

IN HIS LANDMARK 1949 ESSAY, "The Concept of 'Romanticism' in Literary History," René Wellek demonstrates that by the close of the nineteenth century "romanticism" had come to name a distinct and recognizable sensibility in English letters "opposed to the poetry of neoclassicism, and drawing its inspiration and models from the Middle Ages and the Renaissance."[2] Shedding new light on this well-worn account of romanticism, Jeff Strabone's *Poetry and British Nationalisms in the Bardic Eighteenth Century: Imagined Antiquities* reconsiders how the medievalism of textual antiquarians shaped English, Welsh, and Scottish national identities and avant garde poetics. Over the course of five chapters and a brief epilogue, *Poetry and British Nationalisms in the Bardic Eighteenth Century* analyzes the lively intellectual and artistic exchanges among eighteenth-century Britons devoted to (sometimes invented) native literary traditions. The book offers a compelling picture of a British romanticism defined by its "bardic narratives of literary history, new print editions of medieval poetry, and a new, Northern-oriented cultural nationalism in the British nations" (215). Readers of *The Coleridge Bulletin* will find much to admire in the study's consideration of poetic form as historical evidence, especially in two chapters dedicated to Coleridge.

Poetry and British Nationalisms in the Bardic Eighteenth Century begins with an ambitious introduction that connects the work's primary claims to a series of adjacent but distinct contexts. Chapter one provides historical context for the treatment of Anglo-Saxon in English legal, theological, and literary commentary from the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries. This concise overview provides the foundation for Strabone's claim that British commentators lacked interest in the literary merits of medieval verse prior to the eighteenth century. With this background in place, the introduction situates the book's argument in relation to several adjoining theoretical and critical controversies, offering a generous overview of scholarship on the nation as imagined community, bardic nationalism, antiquarianism, romantic mediation, and historical poetics. For scholars looking to catch up on these debates, the chapter will prove a valuable point of entry. In the chapters that follow, *Poetry*

---

[1] Sean Barry is associate professor of English at Longwood University in Virginia. He completed his Ph.D. at Rutgers University and is currently at work on a book that considers the poetics of the list in Romantic-era literature and contemporary theory. His articles on related topics have appeared in *European Romantic Review*, *ELH*, and *Modern Philology*.

[2] René Wellek, "The Concept of 'Romanticism' in Literary History. I. The Term 'Romantic' and Its Derivatives," *Comparative Literature* 1.1 (Winter, 1949): 1–23.

and British Nationalism in the Bardic Eighteenth Century consistently toggles among these scholarly conversations to read Scottish, Welsh, and English cultural nationalisms out of the rhythms of eighteenth and nineteenth-century verse.

Chapters two and three present Allan Ramsay in Scotland and Evan Evans in Wales as the first editors to champion the specifically literary merit (as opposed to the ecclesiastical, legal, or historical significance) of their respective nations' medieval verse. Chapter two emphasizes *The Ever Green* (1724), Ramsay's edition of the sixteenth-century Scots poetry of the makars, presenting that work's celebration of native literary tradition as a fundamental break with earlier editions that had foregrounded the Latin literacy of Scottish poets. Similarly, chapter three examines how Evans and Thomas Gray mediate medieval Welsh verse in order to affirm its bardic tradition. Where chapter two demonstrates Ramsay's sense that he might correct the meter of Scots verse for eighteenth-century readers, chapter three contends that both Evans and Gray's writings manifest a modern conception of time that makes unmediated experience of bardic poetry impossible. In response, Strabone posits, Evans and Gray turned to forms of mediation that refashioned medieval Welsh into Evans's highly literal Latin prose and Gray's English odes. Ultimately these chapters establish Ramsay, Evans, Gray, and other textual antiquarians as innovators whose thinking about cultural nationalism, bardism, and meter constitute key starting points for "the emergence of British Romanticism" (125).

In its second half, *Poetry and British Nationalisms in the Bardic Eighteenth Century* elaborates the romanticism that emerges from textual antiquarianism in two chapters on Coleridge as well as a brief epilogue that turns to Wordsworth and the influence of antiquarianism in the Victorian era. Chapter four refracts Coleridge's relationship to bardism through his commentary on and imitation of Thomas Chatterton, Edward Jones, and Iolo Morganwg (Edward Williams). Here, Strabone argues that Coleridge's *Monody on the Death of Chatterton*, his imitation of Jones, and the aborted Pantisocracy scheme form a series of efforts to link those writers' mediation of medieval verse with a radical politics aimed at the recovery of ancient liberty. Strabone proposes that these efforts coalesce in Coleridge's prose fragment on the *Poetic Edda* and in *Kubla Khan*. The former is a surprising, persuasive reading, while the latter is less so. Chapter five turns from the thematic traces of bardism in Coleridge's lectures and poetry to a focused analysis of meter in *Christabel*, tracing the poem's embrace of a meter that is both new and old to Spenser's *Shepherd's Calendar* and Percy's essay on alliterative meter in *The Reliques of English Poetry*. In a wide-ranging epilogue, *Poetry and British Nationalisms in the Bardic Eighteenth Century* argues that Coleridge's misinformed effort to emulate Anglo-Saxon verse in fact facilitated not only metrical developments such as Gerard Manly Hopkins's sprung rhythm and free verse, but also the narrative of an English literary tradition spanning the millennium from Beowulf to the twentieth century. Strabone's analysis adds frequently surprising detail to a seemingly familiar account of romantic poetry. This book is rigorous in its account of the

decisive role of the bardic in shaping the poetry of the era, so much so that some readers may wish for a more dialectical analysis of the intersections among the varied cultural traditions with which that poetry manifestly engages.

Strabone draws productively on recent developments in the study of antiquarianism, nationalism, and romantic efforts to mediate the past into an account of poetry's central role in the emergence of national identity as a "shared native culture of age-old historical duration" (2). It contributes to a growing body of scholarship that illuminates features of British verse in the period not easily accommodated within the terms of the expressive aesthetic of the romantic lyric. Joining such work as James Mulholland's *Sounding Imperial: Poetic Voice and the Politics of Empire, 1730–1820* (Johns Hopkins UP, 2013), Strabone's study adds further nuance to the story Katie Trumpener tells in her authoritative account, *Bardic Nationalism: The Romantic Novel and the British Empire* (Princeton UP, 1997). In recounting the traffic in old British poetry as "national relics" circulating among antiquarians and across Britain, *Poetry and British Nationalisms in the Bardic Eighteenth Century* gives us a more collaborative, sociable picture of the relations among Scottish, Welsh, and English letters in the romantic period.