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reads
Wales and the Romantic Imagination
(University of Wales Press, 2007)
edited by Damian Walford Davies and Lynda Pratt

WHOEVER EXPECTS *Wales and the Romantic Imagination* to cover topics such as Wordsworth's undoubtedly brilliant and frequently discussed poetic impressions of the Welsh countryside may be disappointed. Yet whoever wants to discover Romantic-period appropriations of and responses to Wales, its landscapes, history and culture will cherish this outstanding collection of essays.

Emerging from the conference "Romantic Wales: Literature, Landscape and Travel, 1740-1850" held in 2001 at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth, the book gathers twelve essays which challenge seemingly familiar and often stereotypical images of Wales as the haven of tranquility—picturesque, pastoral and primitive. Instead, they confront the reader with a Romantic Wales which, characterized by its appeal for political radicals (e.g. Shelley and the young Southey) and its Enlightened modernity (e.g. the ideas of Robert Owen), became "an inspiring political, topographical and cultural alternative to England" (Introduction 4).

The focus on Wales in the critical debates on Romantic regionalism is both timely and original. So far this debate has concentrated on Scotland, Ireland, and, of course, England. *Wales and the Romantic Imagination*, however, demonstrates that although Wales was "a crucial site for the Romantic Imagination" (4), it is (still) "a missing place" (2) on the map of British Romanticism(s). The current book seeks to change this, and it has high aspirations. Firstly, it wants "both to locate 'Romantic Wales' more centrally and [at the same time] to devolve it" (3). Secondly, it wants to intervene "in ongoing debates about the relation between Romanticism and national identity, antiquarianism, politics, print culture and gender" (11). Finally, with *Wales and the Romantic Imagination* Walford Davies and Pratt have set out to "fill an important gap in our current understanding of how Romanticism constituted itself—and continues to constitutes itself—out of diverse cultural experiences" (11f.).

Set against the background of eighteenth-century Welsh cultural renaissance and antiquarianism, the emerging tourism of the picturesque, the cultural, religious and political controversies of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the essays investigate an entire set of cultural and literary networks with one focal point: Wales. Hence, the range of topics covered by this collection is immense. Starting with the question of how the Welsh obsession for mythological and textual genealogies was appropriated for Britain's cultural and propagandist demands as an expanding empire (Michael J. Franklin, "The Colony Writes Back: Brutus, Britanus and the Advantage of Oriental Ancestry"), the collection goes on to discuss how the radical and dissenter

London publisher Joseph Johnson agitated along the Anglo-Welsh borders in the religious and political debates together with Joseph Priestley, Richard Price and the London Welsh Community (Helen Braithwaite, "From the See of St Davids to St Paul's Churchyard: Joseph Johnson's Cross-Border Connections"). Other essays concentrate on topics like the historical novel of Romantic Wales in reference to Scotland and Walter Scott (Andrew Davies, "'Redirecting the Attention of History': Antiquarian and Historical Fictions of Wales in the Romantic Period") and the deliberate elision of Welshness in English satires (Jane Moore, "'Parallelograms and Circles': Robert Owen and the Satirists") – to name but a few.

Yet there are several nodal points that connect the essays with each other in more than one way. One of these is the Anglo-Welsh poet Iolo Morganwg (i.e. Edward Williams) "that one-man Romanticism" as Walford Davies and Pratt call him (2). Poet, drug addict, renowned antiquarian and forger of various historical manuscripts and 'inventor' of Welsh neo-Druidism, Iolo had an immense impact on the intercultural and literary communication between Wales and England. In Mary-Ann Constantine's essay "'A Subject of Conversation': Iolo Morganwg, Hannah More and Ann Yearsley", the stonemason Iolo is examined in his role of the eighteenth-century self-tutored, labouring-class poet modeled on poets like Stephen Duck, Mary Leapor, Ann Yearsley and Robert Burns. Constantine attempts to untangle the triangular relationship between Iolo and More, whom "he is likely to have met" (66) when touring for his subscription list in Bath-Bristol around 1790/91, and Iolo and Yearsley, whom he (probably) never met but who potentially provided a role model for him. Against the backdrop of the contemporaneous public debate over patronage, which was partly sparked by the high-profile break-up of More and her 'protégé' Yearsley, Constantine argues that especially in regard to his Welshness "the triangulation of Iolo Morganwg with More and Yearsley opens up a variety of questions about gender, politics, class and education" (66).

Although gender issues seem to fall too much out of view in the course of Constantine's text, it marks, together with Lynda Pratt's "Southey in Wales: Inscriptions, Monuments and Romantic Posterity", one of the outstanding features of this collection. Both essays implicitly and playfully challenge the term "imagination", the leading concept of the book and of the Romantic period and give it an unexpected twist. What Constantine presents is a partly imaginative reading of a long draft letter from Iolo to More. Constantine pictures possible common topics and themes in which they were both interested (like abolitionism, the legendary Madogwys and, as the essay suggests, Ann Yearsley) as well as possible links in the poems of both Iolo and Yearsley. Constantine is well aware of the slipperiness of her material and method (cf. 80f.), but her careful and thoughtful treatment with the literary sources makes this essay an inspiring read.

In the above-mentioned essay by Pratt, the successful play with the

imagination is even more prominent. Pratt strives to render visible Southey's "often underplayed" (86) Welsh sections of his poem *Madoc* as well as the six unsigned Welsh poems published between March and December 1798 in *Morning Post* (cf. 89). According to Pratt, these poems provide "a reading of the Welsh landscape (past, present and future) as the true home of Freedom" (91). By implication, Southey, Pratt continues, "envisions himself as the latest in a long line of patriot-bards—someone who, though not Welsh himself, is poetically and politically Welsh-identified" (91).

Moreover, Pratt's "essay will attempt […] to consider both what happens and what happen when we put Southey in Wales. It will begin in Wales, move to Keswick and finally return speculatively to Wales" (86). It is here that the essay collection's innovative dealing with the concept of imagination fully sets in. Pratt successfully imagines Southey as a figure oscillating between Cambria and Cumbria. She does so against the backdrop of Southey's Welsh inscription poems and the increasing cultural "significance [of inscriptive writings] as a means of defining and transmitting both to contemporaries and to posterity an image (or images) of national identity" (93). Her discussion is based on Southey's ambivalent and critical allegiance to the so-called Lake Poets (or school), the cultural practice of commemorating Southey both in the Lake District and in Wales and his own hypothetical speculation of what would have been had he stayed in Wales. Would he, Pratt asks, have been a poet laureate "'of the [Welsh] Principality'" (99) as he imagined himself? And how would his difficult relationship to the Lake Poets have changed? Pratt's speculations and jugglings with Southey's and her own imagination persuasively open up "a tantalizing possibility of a counter-factual literary history and critical posterity in which Southey in Wales—devolved geographically and culturally from the "Lake Poets" and contextualized by writers such as Iolo Morganwg—*might* have fared differently from Southey in Keswick" (99).

The overall structure of the book is absolutely convincing. Sometimes the essays share common ground in certain themes (e.g. the Welsh as 'Ancient Britons') or persons (e.g. Iolo, Richard Price), while essays revolving around genres are grouped together. The last part of the book is concerned with the appropriations of Wales/the Welsh by Romantic authors figuring either as visitors (e.g. Savage Landor, and Robert Bloomfield), as affiliated Welsh (e.g. Felicia Hemans) or as Welsh natives (Robert Owen as subject of English satires).

Although the collection refrains from discussing the 'usual suspects' (e.g. Wordsworth), a few major Romantic poets find critical attention. Next to Pratt's excellent essay about Southey, two more articles discuss major Romantic poets and their engagement to Wales which left considerable traces both in their literary works and biographies: Percy Bysshe Shelley and Thomas De Quincey. Shelley's radically ambivalent and, partly, disturbing biographical relationship with Wales and his poetic and epistolary responses to the Welsh sublime are discussed in Cian Duffy's essay "One draught from Snowdon's

Ever-Sacred Spring': Shelley's Welsh Sublime". Duffy argues that "these responses interrogate and lastly seek to formulate a politically progressive or radical alternative to the conventional and essentially conservative British discourse on the natural sublime" (181). Culminating in Shelley's final Welsh poem "On Leaving London for Wales" (1812), Duffy shows the highly ambiguous components of Shelley's notion of Wales which is now rendered as "a locus of *cultural* and *political* forces" in opposition to the corrupt metropolis London.

In stark contrast to Shelley's Welsh experience stands De Quincey's Welsh section of the 1856 extended version of his autobiography *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*. Often neglected in literary criticism, Damian Walford Davies attempts to explore "the contours of the Welsh narrative and seeks to illuminate its significance within the frame of the *Confessions* and the teleology of addiction" (200). In the first part of his essay "'Sweet Sylvan Routes and Grave Methodists': Wales in De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*", Walford Davies outlines the teenage De Quincey's "mini-'tour'" (200) through Wales—his "Cumbria *manqué*" (201)—and discloses "that in retrospect, [Wales] becomes the very ground of De Quincey's addiction" (209). Wales, thus, is "both haven and curse, always-already metropolitan and 'addictive' ground" (210).[1]

In the second part of his brilliant essay, Walford Davies provides a more detailed analysis of two selected episodes of De Quincey's Welsh section: the imagined paper war episode with William Cleaver, Bishop of Bangor and his subsequent stay with a Methodist family. Set against the background of the Methodist controversy, Walford Davies persuasively demonstrates the Welsh's section's political edge and how it "may usefully be read as a contribution to—and a resurrection of that controversy" (221). Additionally, he provides a short narrative of an early twentieth-century revival of De Quincey's Methodist-episode. Here Walford Davies tells the 'tale' of how a Calvinist minister and historian reconstructs De Quincey's Welsh experiences—identifying precisely the location and the family where the poet had stayed. Moreover, De Quincey himself becomes part of the historian's imaginative and "ideological construction" (223). This is not just a highly entertaining anecdote, but one of these moments in which this book successfully manages to give the idea of imagination an unexpected turn without losing its own parameter from sight.

It is important to note in this respect that Walford Davies, like most contributors to this collection, is an eminent scholar in the field of Welsh Literature and Romanticism. In his previous book *Presences that Disturb* (2002), which also focused on Romantic constructions of political, personal and cultural identities in relation to Wales, Walford Davies claims that "[t]o read the margins is not to read marginally" (2). This certainly counts true for *Wales*

[1] Damian Walford Davies's recent article "Pig in a dingle" (*TLS*, 12 March 2010: 13-15) provides additional details about young De Quincey's tour through Wales and his crucial encounter with the "Pig of the dingle" (i.e. Mochyn y Nant) in the North Welsh countryside.

and the Romantic Imagination as well, even though there are times when the principle becomes a truism, and the discussion of Wales and its appropriations remains too faint and "marginal". Jim Shanahan's insights into early nineteenth-century novels, for instance, primarily focus on the Irish historical context while Wales remains, unfortunately, in its traditional place—in the (British) periphery.

There is little else to criticize about the collection, except the fact that one question remains unexplored: the inquiry into Romantic writing within Wales. It has been stated that "Welsh literature was not affected by the Romantic Revival at the time of its greatest vitality"[2]—Iolo always excepted. However, this notion of a *non*-Romantic Wales remains strangely unquestioned, since there are no essays that address the reasons or the circumstances of this dictum.

Other than that, this is an excellent book for a professional readership interested in, and knowledgeable about, Romantic literature and culture. *Wales and the Romantic Imagination* clearly fulfills its aim of locating Wales on the map of British Romanticisms—however not in the margins of an 'English Romantic Empire', but as a central and crucial site for nineteenth-century history, literature and culture.

2 Meic Stephens (ed.), *The New Companion to the Literature of Wales*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1998. 655.