# Richard Hughes Gibson[1]

reads

# *Remaking Romanticism: The Radical Politics of the Excerpt*

(Palgrave Macmillan, 2017)

by Casie LeGette

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IN HIS TOME *THE READING NATION IN THE ROMANTIC PERIOD*,[2] William St Clair taught us that any attempt to understand the writing lives of the famous Romantic authors and the reading lives of the day's average Joe and Jane must take account of the Romantic-era publishing scene. What were printers *actually* printing? How many copies of this novel and that poetry volume were produced? How many editions were made? What actually sold in the London bookstalls? And at what price? The short answer to these questions is that the Romantic "reading nation" consumed vast quantities of Walter Scott—prose and poetry alike—and a great deal of Lord Byron (who might command a print run of 10,000 copies). Wordsworth and Coleridge made fine showings for poets but never saw a print run exceed 2,000 copies. Jane Austen sold respectably; her universal fame would come later. But St Clair wasn't just concerned with authors whom subsequent generations would give canonical status; he also demonstrated that the safest way for a publisher to make a profit was to print English literature's greatest hits, which could be done inexpensively thanks to the lax copyright laws at the time. Thus, St Clair writes, "From the 1780s onwards, publisher after publisher produced an English or British classics poetry series of his own. The books were different in design, in format, in illustrations, in paratextual material [meaning front and back matter], and in price, but scarcely at all in the choice of the texts which they offered." The publishing industry, St Clair argued, had created a new "old canon," modeled on Samuel Johnson's pronouncements, out of "classics" that could be printed on the cheap. Here's the key point for present purposes: the reading nation was replete with reprints.

Casie LeGette's *Remaking Romanticism: The Radical Politics of the Excerpt* has a clear debt to St Clair's pioneering approach, as LeGette herself acknowledges in the introduction (alongside a reference to the historian Jonathan Rose's influential study *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*[3]): "As William St Clair and Jonathan Rose insist, economic considerations should be fundamental to our understanding of literary history more broadly, and the history of reprinting more specifically" (9). But LeGette's book is no mere appendix to St Clair's work (or Rose's for that matter). LeGette investigates a corner of the book world that St Clair only pays a brief visit: the politically *radical* press. *Remaking Romanticism* is concerned above all with radical printers

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[2] William St Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

[3] Jonathan Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

laboring away in the combustible decades of the 1830s and 1840s, the heyday of working-class reform movements such as the Chartists.

In the first of the book's three sections, LeGette demonstrates how pieces written in the high-spirited 1790s by writers who had attained national reputations by the 1830s were adapted by radical printers for their own purposes: "By reprinting texts from the 1790s, radical editors worked to pull that decade into the nineteenth century, insisting upon historical and political continuity between the 1790s and later historical moments." This may seem a perfectly straightforward matter: the 1790s were a time of revolutionary fervor, and many English writers indeed joined in. Shouldn't such texts reappear at another moment of reformist hopes? The trouble was that many of those reprinted writers had moved on from their youthful zeal for revolution, some becoming decidedly conservative in the intervening decades. "Radical reprints" (if you will) were for these writers unwelcome developments, as exemplified by the incredible sales—perhaps 60,000 copies!—of Robert Southey's play *Wat Tyler* (1794) when it reappeared in 1817. The play denounced exactly the conservative political persuasion that Southey had himself assumed. So salacious was the text that it was read aloud in the House of Commons. By the 1830s, LeGette shows, it had become something of a *canonical* text in radical circles, thanks in no small part to its cheap price tag of a few pence.

Of particular interest to readers of this journal will be the sections dedicated to Coleridge and Wordsworth. Both, of course, wrote numerous statements in the nineties that were potentially embarrassing to their mature selves. But LeGette shows that in both cases straightforward reprinting wasn't sufficient for the editors of radical periodicals. Their poems were tucked and trimmed, restitched, patched up, and shorn of context in order to heighten their relevance to the conditions of the thirties and forties. LeGette at one moment refers to the *Chartist Circular* "[turning] the writer's early poetry inside out to construct a politicized Coleridge" of the right dimensions (88). As an example, consider the fate of "Religious Musings" (1794–96). In the course of a ten-line "excerpt," the *Circular*'s editors borrowed a line from the end of the poem to start it off, followed that with a line that appears earlier, and dropped the poet's explanation that his "musings" lead to "heavenly Science." Reshaped, the "musings" now point to the need for an English revolution. Several of Wordsworth's so-called "Liberty Sonnets" composed at the turn of the century come in for similar treatment, with editors taking particular care to strip away the context whereby Wordsworth used France as a warning to his countrymen: "In this new context [of radical printing], Wordsworth's sonnets become much less poems 'goad[ing]' Britons against Napoleon and become instead poems in critique of Britain itself" (96). It is sometimes complained that contemporary literary critics take liberties with the text. LeGette's review of Coleridge's and Wordsworth's radical reprints shows us that the practices that we complain about—which are strictly interpretive—not only have a distinguished history, but also, quite frankly, appear tame in comparison to the custom-tailoring of Romantic-era radical printers.

Structurally, the book veers slightly in its second section, following radical printers to jail to see what they made of it, textually speaking. I have said

"slightly" because LeGette is insistent that the prison literature issued by these radical editors remain anchored in earlier writings, including those of the former radicals discussed in the book's first part (William Godwin, Southey, Coleridge, and Wordsworth). LeGette thus demonstrates in this section that these editors weren't just making clever allusions to works by the writers whom we now call Romantics; they were participating in the process of canon-making. There is a sense in this section that one knows a writer has really made it when a radical references you in his prison memoir. LeGette's deeper and perhaps more interesting claim is that these prison texts found the subjectivity of the Romantic lyric particularly hospitable to their feelings and ambitions. "Editors like [Thomas J.] Wooler picked and chose," LeGette writes, "selecting the poems from the past which could be transformed into contemporary political commentary. Romantic poetry's focus on isolation, inscription, and imprisonment made it particularly amendable" to their project. Take Coleridge's "This Lime-Tree Bower, My Prison." The "prison" is, as the speaker realizes by the end of the poem, anything but: he's surrounded by walnut trees, creeping ivy, and elms, and listens to the buzzing of a nearby bee. He spells out the lesson thusly: "Nature ne'er deserts the wise and pure." LeGette would have us see that Coleridge and his peers created in the nineties not only a set of tropes but also a mode of undergoing solitary experience that radical writers could translate into a very different set of circumstances. The literary form endures, but Nature now takes the backseat to Reform.

The final chapter switches gears again, or perhaps it's better to say that LeGette switches media. Now the voice takes center stage, LeGette chronicling how "poems were incorporated into public speeches and reshaped in the process." The book here turns, as she well puts it, from "re-citation" to "recitation." The chapter uses Shelley's "Song: To the Men of England" as a case study in "oral reception" (if you will), and what makes the poem's recitation history so intriguing, as the author well recognizes, is the number and variety of its later claimants. Shelley's poem provides the fuel for fiery Chartist speeches in the 1840s (which LeGette accesses through newspaper transcripts and accounts) and remains vibrant enough decades later to warrant inclusion in *Chants of Labour: A Songbook of the People* (1888) and *The Socialist Sunday School Tune Book* (1912). Later in the chapter, LeGette traces "Song's" reprinting in various encyclopedic works and recitation guides of a more conventional stripe in the twentieth century. And the lesson she derives from her bibliographical efforts is a good a one: "The varied reception histories of Percy Shelley's poetry serve as a useful reminder of just how many Romanticisms were in play in the nineteenth century"—and we must add, the twentieth and twenty-first as well.

*Remaking Romanticism* is a book that will be most enjoyed by readers with a strong interest in either or both the history of printing and the history of radical politics in Britain, but it makes valuable contributions that deserve wider recognition. St Clair taught us that reprinting in the Romantic period was the safe move, the conservative move, the monetarily sure move. LeGette shows us just how radical a reprint could be, especially if the editor didn't worry about what the author said *exactly*.