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English Romantic Writers and the West Country
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edited by
Nicholas Roe

THIS COLLECTION OF ESSAYS furthers the developing study of regional romanticism and is the successor of recent volumes on the relation between Romanticism and Scottish and Welsh national identities.[1] However, this is the first major attempt to focus such attention on a specific region of England, unless one includes Jenny Uglow's *The Lunar Men*, 2003, which examines the origins of Romantic science in Birmingham. The book under review is an answer to the editor's own call in his introduction: 'Canonical marginality and regional cultures are in fact most urgently in need of reassessment in England.' The fact that it is centred on the South West, an area rich is associations for students of early literary Romanticism, will arouse the special interest of all readers of this Bulletin. They will not be disappointed.

The title evokes three previous works long familiar to Coleridgeans: Professor Knight's *Coleridge and Wordsworth in the West Country*, 1913; Berta Lawrence's *Coleridge and Wordsworth in Somerset*, 1970 and Tom Mayberry's *Coleridge and Wordsworth in the West Country*, 1992. Each contributed in their times to a redirection of attention away from the Lake District and towards the South West, specifically towards the Quantocks and Bristol, as the real seedbed of English literary romanticism. All three books were firmly focused on the so called *annus mirabilis* of 1797-98, while Nicholas Roe's and Kelvin Everest's classic studies, among others, added greater complexity and depth to our understanding of the personalities and the politics in the region at that time. The biennial Coleridge Summer Conference at Cannington in Somerset has over the years helped maintain this steady South Western pressure and this volume grew out of conversations and papers given at the 2002 and 2004 conferences. Nicholas Roe, the 'onlie begetter' of this collection was for many years until 2010 its academic director and chairman. The volume is dedicated to the memory of Jonathan Wordsworth, best known for his involvement with the Wordsworth Trust, but in fact a West Countryman and a Scholar of the Friends of Coleridge. It is deftly introduced by Richard Holmes, a patron of the Friends, and has a characteristically wide-ranging afterword by Tom Mayberry, Chair of The Friends of Coleridge, who is also Heritage Officer for Somerset.

Those readers expecting polemic about 'regional romanticism' and 'topographical criticism' will in the main be disappointed. What they will find instead is a great variety of critical approaches and critical voices along with a

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[1] See Damian Walford Davies and Lynda Pratt (eds), *Wales and the Romantic Imagination* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2007); and Leith Davis, Ian Duncan and Janet Sorensen (eds), *Scotland and the Borders of Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

renewed sense of a distinctive region with a strong, mainly dissenting indigenous culture, criss-crossed by writers and travellers of all kinds and over many years, some drawn by its radical regional culture and some drawn rather by its imaginative promise.

The first section, titled 'Landscapes and Legends', provides an antiquarian introduction to the area. Joanne Parker's essay on 'The South West's Megaliths in the Romantic Period' introduces what to many will be completely new material. She traces the decline of the fanciful and sentimental engagements with prehistory in the South and West and the emergence of the rigour and empiricism in studying this material, which ultimately led to the modern discipline of archaeology. She points out that the area has more than 7,000 prehistoric monuments, of which Stonehenge and Avebury are merely the best known. William Stukeley's studies of these two stone circles in the 1740s emphasised a Druidic interpretation. Wordsworth and Blake responded to this new emphasis, but so did, for example, the indefatigable Joseph Cottle in his 1826 poem *Dartmoor*. Parker identifies Burke's conception of the sublime as a second stimulus to this preoccupation with Dartmoor and megaliths and goes on to list a surprising number of poems on this subject not only by Chatterton and Hemans, but by unknowns such as Carrington and Salmon. Nick Groom, in 'Chatterton and the Ecology of the West Country', begins by pointing out how much Chatterton defined himself in opposition to the prevailing commercialism of his native Bristol. He then briefly examines the literary antiquarianism of Percy's *Reliques* and Chatterton's response to this, and goes on to look very closely at Chatterton's treatment of flora and fauna in his verse. Groom identifies two of what he calls these 'poetic ecologies', which were to be of great significance to Coleridge. The first was the precise detailing of flowers and birds, initially inspired by earlier poets such as Spenser and Milton; the second was landscape as an imagined environment. He suggests that Coleridge's preoccupation with the minutiae of flora, for example in his botanical footnote to 'This Lime-tree Bower My Prison', and in his constant representation of 'dells' and secluded gardens, both betray a lingering fascination with Chatterton.

The second main section of the volume on 'The Bristol School' is the heart of the collection. It is in Richard Cronin's opening essay that something closest to polemic emerges in his re-presentation of Joseph Cottle, for so long the fall-guy of Romantic studies, but who is here presented as a man full of energy and ambition for Bristol as a mini-Athens and a literary centre in its own right. In this reshaping of literary history it is Southey, Coleridge and Wordsworth who are recruited and managed by Cottle for his own ends rather than the other way round. On this reading, Cottle's resentment of the way in which Bristol was later airbrushed out of Coleridge's literary autobiography appears fully justified. Having shown how consciously Cottle sought to create a Bristol School, Cronin goes on to point out that he missed his best scoop by not printing *Salisbury Plain* and *The Ruined Cottage* and exposes the contradictions involved in the provincial or 'cottage' epic as a genre. He

suggests that in works such as Southey's *Joan of Arc* and Cottle's *Alfred,* the authors use the epic form in order to claim authority for their own provincial Nonconformist values but that the genre is in conflict with the regional and local values espoused. Cronin identifies *The Ruined Cottage* as 'the masterpiece of West County Romanticism', because the quiet and provincial narrative voice of the poem is in keeping with its 'cottage epic' form.

Three other essays in this section focus on different aspects of the tradition of religious Dissent and political radicalism in Bristol and the West Country. Tim Whelan's remarkable mastery of the minutiae of Baptist congregations and their networks is used to bring out clearly how it was, once again, Joseph Cottle who introduced Coleridge on his arrival from Cambridge to so many important Baptists in Bristol such as Josiah Wade, Thomas Roberts and others. He further shows how Coleridge's *Watchman* tour of the Midlands relied upon contacts provided by Cottle and others and demonstrates that it was the Baptist community at Cambridge, centred on St Andrew's Street, whose congregation included Benjamin Flower, the editor of the *Cambridge Intelligencer*, which provided the real impetus for Coleridge's leap across country to Bristol in the first place. Peter Kitson moves further south for his essay, which focuses on the Unitarian ministers Joshua Toulmin and Robert Howell in Taunton and Bridgwater respectively. He points out that it is from Toulmin and his substantial writings that Coleridge learns to ground his Unitarian Nonconformity in a tradition of historical struggle going back to the seventeenth century in England and to the long tradition of Protestant Dissent. It is from this tradition rather then from French revolutionary politics that Coleridge's politically engaged radicalism derives. Anthony Harding's essay 'Radical Bible: Coleridge's 1790s West Country Politics', one of the most substantial in the book, deepens and expands the pieces by Whelan and Kitson by adding a new element to the analysis of Coleridge's Unitarian radicalism. This was the extent to which the Unitarian method of reading the Bible, which was close, passionate but highly critical and intellectually informed, gave Coleridge the opportunity to combine rational and religious inquiry and thus to discover for himself a pacific message in the New Testament. Harding convincingly shows that, along with other Unitarians of the time, Coleridge's radicalism, including his millenarianism, was scripturally based.

In case the West Country in the 1790's begins to seem inhabited almost entirely by earnest Unitarian and Baptist ministers, Nonconformity of a completely different kind is encountered in Paul Cheshire's entertaining and vivid account of William 'Hurricane' Gilbert. This marginal figure, barrister, conjuror, astrologer and year long resident of Henderson's asylum at Hanham, has been almost single-handedly rescued from obscurity by Cheshire, who has created a website devoted to him. No one could read this piece without enjoying it and without a sense of guilty pleasure that here, at last, was a Romantic figure in the old sense of someone mad and dangerous to know. Cheshire, however, is not content simply to provide a portrait, but also builds up a sense of Gilbert's Bristol literary milieu at the time. He outlines the poetic

duel between two of 'Bristolia's' bards, RJ Thorn and Robert Lovell, and Cottle once again features in the section on his Bristol Album of 1795, in which he included poems by Southey, Gilbert himself, Lovell, Coleridge, Beddoes and other poets of what Cottle later would call in *Early Recollections* 'The Augustan Age of Bristol'. Gilbert's final resting place remains, tantalisingly and fittingly, unknown.

The third section of this volume is called 'Imagining the West Country' and moves decisively away from the close historical study of Bristol's literary and Nonconforming communities and Coleridge's place in them. For this reason, some readers of this Bulletin may be tempted to skip lightly over this section. This would be a mistake. Each piece is of considerable weight, even if together they do not have the cumulative coherence of the previous section. Carol Kyros Walker's piece on Wordsworth's 1793 journey to the West Country and Wales is another in her series of studies of Romanticist walking tours. This journey was arguably more central to the most significant and characteristic works of the period than were either Coleridge's or Keats's tours of Scotland, both of which she has also documented. Walker's clear and readable account can be warmly recommended and will no doubt be much consulted by students of early Wordsworth. We move further west in Graham Davidson's meticulous examination of Coleridge's troubled relationship with 'his sweet birth-place' in Devon, 'far in the West'. Coleridge's lifelong sense of alienation and exile is traced not just to the fact of his early transplantation to Christ's Hospital in London but to something deep within himself, and identifiable since early childhood. The literary nostalgia for his West Country roots found in the early verse is shown to be emphatically at odds with his actual experience of revisiting Devon as an adult. His letters reveal Coleridge to have been unswervingly critical of the inhabitants' narrow provincialism. 'I found them (almost universally) to be gross without openness, and cunning without refinement' (CL I 53). A particularly welcome feature of this piece is Davidson's detailed reading of several very early poems by Coleridge written in 1793 in Devon, including some added to the canon by JCC Mays, such as 'Epigram on My Godmother's Beard', which, although never published, somehow came to Mrs Munday's attention and caused him to be struck out of her will, thus invalidating in advance Auden's glum dictum that 'Poetry makes nothing happen'.

Linda Pratt, Damian Walford Davies and Tim Fulford for the most part relocate the reader further north to the Wye Valley. Linda Pratt, however, begins with Somerset and demonstrates that for Southey the West Country was not just a site of literary production and networking (Cottle once again), but a place whose landscapes, history and legends played a significant part in his early poetry, especially in his Inscription poems. She argues that Southey's poetic engagement with the West Country was a stimulus to the much better known poetry of Coleridge and Wordsworth at the time. Her piece ends touchingly with Southey's 1836 return to the scenes of his youth, during which he visited Joseph Cottle, Bowles, Poole and finally Derwent Coleridge in

Cornwall. Walford Davies's piece on 'Romantic Hydrography: Tide and Transit in "Tintern Abbey"' is perhaps the most original and unusual piece in the volume. Davies aims to extend and modify Levinson's influential 1986 New Historicist critique of Wordsworth's poem in its location. He revives an earlier suggestion that some of it may have been composed on board the 'small vessel to Bristol' mentioned in Christopher Wordsworth's *Memoirs*. Having accepted that the poem was partly composed on river and estuary water, and appropriating a method derived from Franco Moretti's 'literary geography', Davies attempts what he calls a 'hydrographical' reading of the poem, using precise data for the tides of July 1798 generated by contemporary software and presented here in a series of charts and graphs. Readers will have to decide for themselves how persuasive they find Davies's interpretation. However, most will concur that it is a highly original reading of a familiar poem and the only essay in the volume to deliberately engage with critical theory at an advanced level.

Tim Fulford has been drawing Romanticists' attention to Robert Bloomfield for some time. The present writer was, as it happens, like Bloomfield, born and spent his childhood near Bury St Edmunds in Suffolk and can testify as to how incredibly difficult it used to be to lay one's hands on any of his writing or on any worthwhile secondary material. Bloomfield remained for most of us merely a local legend. All this has changed in recent years, thanks to Fulford among others. He points out how much better known at the time was Bloomfield than were either Coleridge or Wordsworth, the *The Farmer's Boy*, 1800, outselling *Lyrical Ballads* by twenty to one. He then shows how Bloomfield became imprisoned in his role as a Suffolk peasant poet and how he was prevented by his booksellers and by his own lack of confidence from realising his ambitious plans for *The Banks of the Wye*, his own West Country poem, analysed here in telling detail.

The final section, called 'In Pursuit of Spring' in homage to Edward Thomas, draws us still further away in time from the 1790's. Michael O'Neill juxtaposes Shelley and Hazlitt, using the latter's great essay 'My First Acquaintance with Poets' to trace the source of what O'Neill memorably terms his 'embittered nostalgia'. He points out that Hazlitt's critique of the radical ideals of Coleridge, Wordsworth and Shelley is based upon his profound suspicion of all poets' idealising tendencies. They were all, he asserted, 'clogged by no dull system of realities'. Nicholas Roe stays with second generation Romantics in his consideration of the evidence pertaining to Keats's encounters with the West Country and especially in the legend of his West Country forbears. Roe does this kind of thing superbly well, as he demonstrated years ago in his definitive re-examination of the Spy Nozy episode. Here he searchingly exposes the cluster of associations and myths around Keats's and Joseph Severn's Dorset landing on their voyage to Rome, which are gathered into Hardy's poem 'At Lulworth Cove a Century Back'. He then looks at the tradition that the lines in 'The Eve of St Agnes' about 'A casement high and triple arched…' are based upon the windows of the Chapel

in Stansted Park and suggests an alternative source in the shape of the windows of the schoolhouse in Enfield where Keats was educated. (The façade of which, astonishingly, is still on display at the Victoria and Albert Museum.) Roe leaves the final verdict as to Keats's West Country forbears open, but brilliantly ends his piece with a topographically resonant line from a manuscript version of 'The Eve of St Agnes': 'Over the Dartmoor black I have a home for thee.' Saeko Yoshikawa fittingly ends the volume where it first began, with Edward Thomas's journey by bicycle to the Quantocks in search of the imaginative world of Coleridge and Wordsworth at the time of *Lyrical Ballads*.

This is a diverse, fascinating and entertaining collection. Does it successfully present the West Country as a focus for Romantic writers beyond the Wordsworth and Coleridge of *Lyrical Ballads* 1798? I believe it does. Anyone seriously interested in early literary Romanticism, the West Country's appeal to the literary imagination or in the distinctive regional varieties of literary Romanticism will want to read it. The volume is also a wonderfully appropriate legacy of Nicholas Roe's involvement with the Coleridge Summer Conference in Cannington, Somerset over so many years.