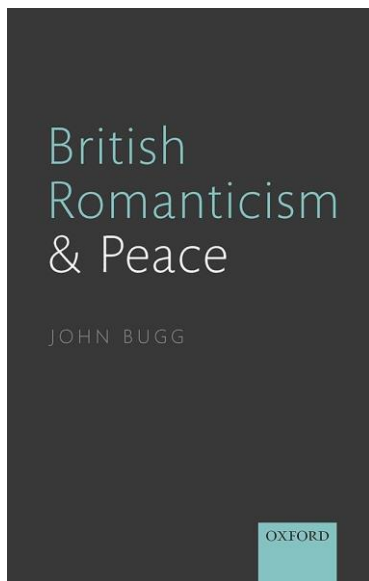


Jennifer Davis Michael
reads
British Romanticism and Peace
by John Bugg¹

‘P EACE IS NOT MERE ABSENCE OF WAR’:² these words from Spinoza aptly describe John Bugg’s approach in *British Romanticism and Peace*. Bugg is careful to distinguish the affirmation of peace in the literature of the period from the denunciation of war. He argues that while establishing the significance of war in Romantic writing, scholars have neglected the discourse around peace in its own right. Through a blend of historical context and close reading of poetry and prose, Bugg examines a sampling of literary



responses to three major treaties of the time, the Treaty of Paris (1783), the Treaty of Amiens (1802), and the Treaty of Paris (1814–15). The result is a highly readable and thoughtful argument with implications well beyond the Romantic period.

Bugg acknowledges the thorough work of such critics as Simon Bainbridge³ and Mary Favret⁴ in showing how war shaped the period. He warns, however, that such war-focused studies can have the effect of ‘reproducing Romantic-era attempts to marginalize voices for peace, and in doing so we reenact contemporary efforts to privilege war as somehow fundamental to what it means to be human’ (3). Noting that the peace of Amiens is often described by default as ‘failed’, because it broke down within a year, Bugg suggests to the contrary that ‘any peace that saves one life, one limb, is a success’ (4). Moreover, he points out the way in which we tend to read back, say, the tension and disillusionment of 1803 onto the optimism of 1802, and this anachronism replicates itself as scholars quote one another. Thus, while Bugg is committed to representing the history accurately, what is at stake is a much broader humanistic concern to give peace a place and a voice. Hence, he chooses to focus not on anti-war writings that detail the horrors of war, but

¹ John Bugg, *British Romanticism and Peace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

² Benedict de Spinoza, *A Political Treatise*, chapter 5, in *The Chief Works of Benedict de Spinoza*, translated by R.H.M. Elwes (London: George Bell and Sons, 1891). https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/elwes-the-chief-works-of-benedict-de-spinoza-vol-1#lf1321-01_label_379

³ Simon Bainbridge, *Napoleon and English Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), and *British Poetry and the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars: Visions of Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

⁴ Mary A. Favret, *War at a Distance: Romanticism and the Making of Modern Wartime* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

rather on those that advocate peacemaking as a positive effort, not merely the restraint or absence of violence.⁵

In the process, Bugg considers some lesser-known texts while also reading some familiar ones in a new light. While Coleridge gets only a passing mention in the book, specifically with regard to ‘Fears in Solitude’, Bugg’s analysis will be of interest to students of Coleridge for the way it delineates a changing political and social landscape during Coleridge’s most productive years. In particular, I found myself thinking of ‘Dejection: An Ode’, with its imagery of ‘an host in rout’ followed by the softer moaning of the wind. By focusing on some less canonical texts, Bugg leaves space for his readers to make their own connections.

In Chapter 1, ‘Helen Maria Williams and the 1783 Peace of Paris’, Bugg uses Benjamin West’s unfinished painting of the treaty negotiations to contextualize Williams’s *Ode on the Peace*. Bugg reads this poem as looking both inward to the poet’s own responsibilities and outward to what the peace will require from the nation at large. Throughout the book, Bugg does not view his chosen texts in isolation. In this case, he includes reactions to the peace by William Cowper and an anonymous cartoonist to reflect how the English public, already ambivalent about the American War, had similar ambivalence about the peace that followed it. As Bugg puts it, Williams’s task is ‘to disarticulate the peace from sectarian discourses of blame and jeremiads of national failure’ (49). While her poem acknowledges the human costs of war, this act of mourning is limited to the first twelve stanzas, just over a third of the entire poem. Williams uses what Bugg calls a ‘parisological [that is, ambiguous or equivocal] poetics’ (54) to represent the arrival of peace in Britain. As an example, Williams refers to ‘the soft path of Peace’, which could mean either the path peace has to walk, or peace itself as a path (56). Bugg finds the ambiguity deliberate. Likewise, as Williams separates the agency of peace from any sense of divine will, she forgoes the easy cover that ‘Providence’ could provide. Instead, Bugg argues, Williams uses the tools of the poet—syntax, diction, rhyme, alliteration, and so on. While it’s clear that in doing so she avoids and perhaps defuses partisan quarrels, it’s less clear to this reader that poetic ambiguity is actively doing the work of peace.

The first chapter closes with a brief examination of Williams’s ‘Ode to Peace’, a response to the Treaty of Amiens, forming a bridge to the reading of Wordsworth’s sonnets of 1802 in Chapter Two. Bugg identifies two main problems in the reading of these sonnets: first, their tendency to be viewed through the biographical lens of the poet’s reunion with Annette Vallon, and second, the ‘flattened chronology’ that lumps these sonnets together with those of 1803 and 1804 (64). Here, Bugg is taking on not only other readings of Wordsworth but also more broadly the historical tendency to read the 1802 peace only in terms of its collapse in 1803, despite contemporary accounts of

⁵ Unfortunately, Bugg’s book appeared less than a year before Andrew Lincoln’s *Imagining War and Peace in Eighteenth-Century Britain, 1690–1820* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), so that neither is in direct dialogue with the other. Lincoln’s book deals with a much broader period and less with peace as a positive construct.

celebration and enthusiasm (66). It is our modern obsession with perpetual war, Bugg suggests, that makes it difficult 'to imagine a world that could imagine a world without war' (67). He sets up his discussion of Wordsworth with a look at Maria Edgeworth's travelogue from her visit to Amiens as a corrective to nationalist prejudice. Turning then to a close reading of Wordsworth's sonnets (four based in Calais and two on returning to Dover), Bugg carefully and effectively shows how Wordsworth disrupts and deflects jingoistic clichés and the rhetoric of war.

Next, Chapter Three turns from poetry to the prose of William Cobbett and his response to Trafalgar and the death of Nelson in 1805. Bugg traces Cobbett's skepticism over the victory to Cobbett's own brief military experience. Bugg traces a line from the exposé *The Soldier's Friend*, through Cobbett's translation of Georg Friedrich von Martens' *Law of Nations*, to his broader critique of the British military around the time of the Peace of Amiens. To some extent, this chapter seems an outlier in the book, dealing as it does with neither a poet nor a novelist, but a political writer and journalist. Nonetheless, for Bugg, the study of Cobbett serves two functions: one, to help account for Cobbett's atypical drift from conservative to radical politics; and two, to show Cobbett as a unique case of someone who rejected the Peace of Amiens but later became 'the strongest voice for peace in the British press' (145). By carefully combing through Cobbett's writings in *The Political Register* and elsewhere, Bugg finds Cobbett in 1811 contemplating how to negotiate with Napoleon. Cobbett subsequently reconsiders the entire arc of the war with France, beginning in 1792, and comes to see the mismanagement of the war, especially by Wellington, as a greater threat to Britain's security than Napoleon is. What makes Cobbett, in the end, a proponent of peace is his conclusion that the advocates of war do not have Britain's best interest at heart, but rather their own profit.

Bugg turns to the work of Keats and Austen in response to the 1814 Treaty of Paris in Chapter Four. Keats's early sonnet 'On Peace' has received relatively little attention, but Bugg reads it not with respect to the poet's development but rather as an expression of the historical moment. He notes the breaking open of the pentameter in a line celebrating 'Europa's liberty' (157) and also the instructions given to Europe to 'keep thy chains burst' (158). The sonnet, Bugg concludes, is 'a call to action' (159): a call continued in Austen's novel *Persuasion*, which occupies the bulk of the chapter. Bugg reads *Persuasion* through the lens of Captain Benwick: a character who never speaks but is often mentioned. As a returning soldier, Benwick represents specific postwar anxieties about space and assimilation, as some 300,000 military personnel were returning to Britain in the period from 1814 to 1816 (165). However, Austen presents both Benwick and Harville as taking up residence unobtrusively, 'barely touching the land' (167). Far from needing care for physical or psychological effects from the war, Benwick renders aid to the civilian Louisa when she is injured during recreation (175). As with other works, Bugg is careful to pinpoint the novel's historical moment: though

composed after Waterloo, it is set during the period from 1814–15 that is often called the ‘false peace’ because there would be a resurgence of violence later in 1815. However, Bugg finds it very much a novel of peacetime, and even ‘an inaugural work of the long peace’ (180).

In conclusion, Bugg underscores what he considers the anachronistic danger of projecting modern assumptions about the inevitability of war onto the early nineteenth century. This is not simply a matter of historical precision, but also of human capacity and hope. Bugg makes a persuasive and moving case that peace is not merely a gap between battles, but a positive condition, indeed the foundation of a just society. As such, it is ‘something that the Romantics still have to teach us’ (185). We would do well to heed both them and him.