

David Higgins, *British Romanticism, Climate Change, and the Anthropocene – Writing Tambora*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. Pp 142. £49.99. ISBN 9783319678931.

The Palgrave Pivot series is renowned for modest, handsome titles, offering fresh and innovative research from writers wishing to develop their disciplines in accessible and informative ways. *Writing Tambora* is a good example of where literary criticism can go as we reboot our discipline to make it relevant to the ensuing sixth great extinction in which there will be no books and no humans to read them. David Higgins both clarifies the contemporary context for reading historical texts, and demonstrates a sophisticated balance between traditional close reading and more innovative critical practices that have come to us via the environmental humanities.

Writing Tambora refers to an ecocritical turn in Romantic studies in 1996 to ground and to legitimate the more innovative, textual scholarship that Higgins mobilizes with allusion to new materialism, extinction and climate change. The resultant literary critical method in Higgins's study is the sum of two vectors: one reads a climate crisis (the Tambora eruption of 1815) as 'a textual catastrophe' (2); the other attempts to square Romantic ideology with Anthropocene studies. The former alerts the reader to Higgins' interest in environmental rhetoric; the latter anchors the study in terms familiar to Romanticists. The human capacity to shape the world, and our vulnerability to elemental forces we cannot control; these tired intellectual ideas are fortunately put to the test and animated by the paradox of the Anthropocene: a species-wide global agency that obscures our inevitable extinction. Higgins's first textual exhibit comes late to the book (page 29 of 142pp); however, it is rich and ripe for his idiosyncratic analysis: 'As every untrodden path affords some new incitement to the inquisitive mind, so we may look for much in the various branches of Natural History' (29) – these are the presumed words of Thomas Stamford Raffles writing on the Tambora event in the *Transactions of the Batavian Society*, one arm of the British colonising project of the nineteenth century with a history in eighteenth-century Dutch culture. For Higgins, Raffles's sense that literacy for localised natural history would lead to more productive colonies can only be placed alongside indigenous readings of the eruption within a 'totalising, and disinterested narrative' (33); Raffles' allusions to Milton's description of the sublime – 'In dim Eclipse disastrous twilight sheds' – draws attention to the ways eyewitness accounts are mediated by metanarrators, how natural atmospheres veil individual experience, and why colonial texts should be read alongside meteorological phenomena (in which they are enmeshed but seek to escape). Knowledge, technology and the comprehension of alienating local conditions take centre stage in Higgins's second chapter that critiques attempts to exert and to encode representational control. Chapter three places us once more in proximity to Mont Blanc, Byron, Shelley and a 'concern with the fragility of human dwelling within a potentially violent universe' (59), now understood as a textual ecology that repeats key images and tropes. [Q] What is new in Higgins' study? [A] Emphases on the desolating power of ice, the finitude of the human species, cosmic space and global cooling.

Such emphases are found within the 'dwelling-place' of Shelley's *Mont Blanc*. Our dwelling plight—to be in this world and do no harm—is not simply a question of connection or interconnection; it is partly a question of our *sense* of how we are connected is shared with others, and how this practice of sharing shapes our feelings. Drawing on Michael O'Neill's reading of Shelley's poem, Higgins reads the syntax of *Mont Blanc* as binding species into a shared ecosystem but with separate destinies. Whether Shelley's poem demonstrates antiquated anthropocentrism or proto-Anthropocene philosophy is not at stake here; the 'response to environmental change' is what Higgins invites us to consider, with all the

difficulty this raises in our period of great change, instability and insecurity as to the fate of the 'race of man' (67-68).

Writing Tambora insists there is value in historical scholarship that teases out the politics and poetics of the dialectic between material events and creative practice. The Anthropocene invites us to think in deep time and decentre the human; Higgins refers to geological events and couples their meaning to experience at the human scale. Higgins's study offers valuable and instructive examples of the ways catastrophe is rhetorically produced and how the sources of our literary heritage mediate human-material interdependencies. We are reminded that the dynamic relation between organism and environment exist as a socio-ecological nexus, where our world is viewed in general terms as a series of connections between cultural practices and evolution. This reality check is perhaps as important as rehearsing our post-structuralist lexicon; assemblages and asymmetry, heteroglossia and hyperobjects are valuable terms for ecocritical practice, but this reviewer is left unconvinced of their ethical value in the context of the battle between imperial discourse and indigenous epistemology in the period under study *and today*.

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