

Jeff Strabone, *Poetry and British Nationalisms in the Bardic Eighteenth Century: Imagined Antiquities*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018. Pp. 351. £69.99. ISBN 978331995254.

This is an impressive, subtle, and well-informed book that links the emergence of cultural nationalism in Scotland, Wales and England during the eighteenth century with the editing of archaic texts and the use of poetic metre. Nationalism remains central to these nations and the United Kingdom they currently form a part of, and Strabone joins many Romantic critics in exploring that topic. It is far rarer, though, to see such detailed attention paid to the role that poetic metre plays in these constructs, and the book is especially valuable for that reason.

Drawing on but pushing beyond Benedict Anderson, Strabone argues that the version of nationalism that emerged in the eighteenth century can be described as ‘modern’: ‘non-elite actors gave the nation cultural definition rather than a political definition controlled by the powerful’ (49). Poets, antiquarians and editors began to look to medieval literary texts for the cultural foundations of their nations. Where it might now seem natural to think of *Y Gododdin*, Gawin Douglas, or *Beowulf* as the origins of a continuous cultural story, that is possible only if those texts are, first, available and, second, framed critically as valuable. For Swift, Dryden and Pope, access to such texts was impossible, but also undesirable: the literary roots they aspired to were classical, not rugged and rude, and the poetic metre they adopted aimed to replicate the polish they found in that heritage. In the years following the 1707 Union, this began to change.

Allan Ramsey’s editing of Middle Scots poets like William Dunbar and Robert Henryson established ‘a new kind of national poetry, more low than high, which unapologetically elevated the demotic and advanced a uniquely Scottish sense of sociability’ (98). This depended on two slightly dubious moves. First, Ramsey makes these cosmopolitan European poets appear far more rugged than they ever were. But he also reveals his Popean inheritance, intervening in the editing process to smooth out the metre, to make it more pleasingly classical. Ramsey’s Scottishness, Strabone shows, is a complex thing, and these contradictions and overlapping motivations make his work the more telling.

The relationship between Wales and England dominates the book. After rather exhaustively detailing the history of politics and printing in Wales in the medieval and early modern periods, Strabone details the emergence of a new kind of interest in early Welsh poetry. The crucial mediator is Evan Evans, who collated, translated and published ancient Welsh texts. Evans in turn provided the means by which English writers defined an English national past that quietly absorbed the Welsh bardic tradition. Strabone brilliantly reads Thomas Gray’s anxiously precise bending of classical metre to evoke the quite different metrical traditions from Wales and Old Norse, and in doing so construct a new story of English cultural continuity.

We encounter many other figures, such as Iolo Morganwg and Edward Jones, but the centrepiece is a reading of Coleridge’s *Christabel*, a poem that from the first was recognised for the startling strangeness of its metre, a set of experiments that seemed both old and new at the same time. Strabone reconstructs the readings and misreadings of Edmund Spenser and Thomas Percy that produce the poem’s dazzling if fictional attempt to mediate a rude authenticity.

The study as a whole raises questions that other scholars may be provoked to take forward. It is not quite clear which nation’s cultural history Coleridge thinks he is invoking. This is a poem of the English north that makes use of Percy’s border lore and claims the Welsh bards as the originators of English-language poetic traditions. Welsh and Scottish cultural nationalisms are defined tightly by the figures Strabone considers, but English nationalism is a vaguer thing, as it still is. As David Higgins’s *Romantic Englishness* (2014) indicates, the interweaving of local, English, British and imperial senses of belonging can prove productively

unsettled. As Strabone indicates, the Isle of Man, Cornwall, Shetland, Yorkshire, Norfolk and other locations all made remarkably similar claims in the period to a set of cultural traditions that look close to being ‘national’. Strabone excludes Ireland, Scottish Gaelic culture and Ossian, but I couldn’t help wondering how the story would look if those interactions had been mapped. Fuller consideration of Walter Scott – antiquarian, metrical experimenter, editor and forger of ancient texts, and writer whose novels can be considered a set of essays on the fictions that create Scottish, Welsh and English cultural nationalism – would certainly deepen the story Strabone develops here.

It is a strength of Strabone’s original and thorough research that it so often made me wonder about those figures who lie just beyond his limits. This insightful and original book will have a significant influence on Romantic studies, most especially in its intelligent balancing of metrical and historical forms of knowledge.

David Stewart
Northumbria University