

Alan Bewell, *Natures in Translation: Romanticism and Colonial Natural History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017. Pp. xvii + 393. \$60. ISBN 9781421420967.

In this superb work of cultural-historical scholarship, Alan Bewell sheds new light on how Romantic-period literature reflects ‘a world in which natures were traveling and resettling the globe like never before’ (xiv). Rather, therefore, than seeing ‘Nature’ as kind of static backdrop to human activity, Bewell understands the pluralised ‘natures’ as mobile ‘products of translation, as complex materialities deeply linked to language’ (xiv). The most exciting parts of this book are those that cover underexplored texts. A convincing case is made for the modernity of Erasmus Darwin’s conception of a changing, mobile, and cosmopolitan natural world, despite his reliance on an outmoded poetic form. This discussion is followed by two terrific chapters: one on the transnational natures produced by colonial travel and particularly the transplantation of flora such as breadfruit; and the other on natural history in colonial Australia, in which the analysis moves skilfully between visual and verbal sources. There is also a very good chapter on William Bartram’s *Travels*, a key text not only of North American travel writing and natural history, but also of British Romanticism through its impact on William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Bewell’s argument culminates in the book’s penultimate chapter on Lyell and Darwin. Simply putting these figures in a book on Romanticism recontextualises them in fascinating ways, and Bewell shows brilliantly how Darwin develops but also revolutionises earlier understandings of colonial natures by seeing them not as aberrant but as exemplary: ‘he thus returned from the voyage on the *Beagle* with an idea of nature as being thoroughly *modern*, as constantly emerging from the crucible of variation, difference, mobility, migration, conflict, territorial expansion, and settlement’ (297).

Perhaps inevitably, the chapters on canonical figures offer less scope for originality. The analyses of *The Natural History of Selborne*, *The Ruined Cottage*, and John Clare are always interesting and astute, but lack the cutting edge of the other chapters. The chapter on Gilbert White, for example, spends rather too long on familiar ground and does not fully develop the interesting argument around White’s nervousness about invasive and migratory species, or the theoretical potential of the fascinating idea of understanding animals as cosmopolitan subjects. There are some very good readings of Clare’s poetry, but his concern with ‘stability’ is for me overstated and Bewell unfortunately follows most Clare critics in neglecting his brilliant natural history prose. Occasionally the argument in these chapters relies too much on assertion, generalisation, and amplification, and would benefit from a more economical approach. Despite some productive references to Bruno Latour, Bewell is also perhaps not as open as he might be to contemporary ecological thinking: Timothy Morton, for example, is dealt with rather too briefly and dismissively; the ever-increasing body of humanities work on the Anthropocene is ignored; and the attack on historicism for viewing nature as ‘inherently ahistorical and antithetical to human culture and mind’ (11) seems a little out of date.

However, it is perhaps churlish to find fault with such a capacious and erudite study that does so many things so well. Indeed, the final chapter of *Natures in Translation* even achieves the rare feat of saying something new and interesting about *Frankenstein* by analysing its concern with ‘species’ in relation to the writings of Erasmus Darwin and the Comte De Buffon, and arguing that it offers a critique of Enlightenment ideas of ‘Nature’ as a fixed set of taxonomic categories. Bewell ends with a moving account of how Mary Shelley represents the mobility and the precarity of the human species itself: a natural form, that like all others, will one day only exist as a kind of haunting. Anyone who works on British

The BARS Review, No. 54 (Spring 2020)

Romanticism will find something of value in this book and it will be an essential point of reference for anyone interested in Romantic ecologies and/or imperialism.

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