

Dewey W. Hall, *Romantic Naturalists, Early Environmentalists: An Ecocritical Study, 1789-1912*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2014. Pp. 232. ISBN 9781409422648.

Romantic Naturalists, Early Environmentalists presents ecocritical re-readings of British and American Romantic texts that emphasise materiality of environments over analysis of a discursive 'nature', and offers a new understanding of the role of the nature writer in the Romantic period. Hall's interdisciplinary book centres on the meeting point between the literary and the scientific, which it labels 'Romantic naturalist', stressing that the writing of Wordsworth and Romantic contemporaries, and that of Emerson later, might not be the product of scientists but is certainly fuelled by the 'metaphors' of the 'wonders' of science (19) discovered through an abiding interest in natural history. Hall's insightful comparative reading of poems by Wordsworth and Gilbert White, *An Evening's Walk* and *A Naturalist's Summer-Evening Walk*, convincingly illustrates this connection and reveals both writers' shared investment in noting habitat factors and observing interaction between human and nonhuman life. Hall argues that White's personal and affective style is what draws his writing in line with literary Romanticism, and finds in Wordsworth's poetry an interest in climate, geology and topography that encourages recognition of the poet's affinity with naturalists.

Hall posits that the affection for nature which 'Romantic naturalist' literature engenders encouraged a desire to safeguard sites from overdevelopment, providing inspiration which manifested in direct action to protect the environment. To support his thesis, Hall re-examines Wordsworth's letters of protest against rail incursions into Grasmere, and makes the interesting assertion that the recurring imagery of wreaths of smoke across Wordsworth's poetry may refer to a paper mill in the Wye Valley, persuasively arguing that this smoke was for Wordsworth a visual warning of the damage industrial advancement could cause; a spur, if one were needed, to action against steam trains to the Lakes. Over the course of *Romantic Naturalists, Early Environmentalists*, Hall demonstrates, firstly, how Wordsworth's 'anti-industrial sensibility' (91) left an impression on Emerson, especially over the issue of increased steam travel and, secondly, how Emerson's manifestos for living in harmony with nature then left a lasting mark upon John Muir's early environmentalism.

Hall lifts to surface the literary sources supporting Octavia Hill's and John Muir's early environmentalist campaigns. By returning to archival material, Hall is able to highlight Wordsworth's influence for Hill and identifies a personal link between them through Margaret Gillies, from whom Hill inherited a portrait of, and anecdotes about, the poet. *Romantic Naturalists* proceeds to remedy the scant critical attention paid to Muir's debt to literary Romanticism with an extended examination of Wordsworthian and Emersonian inspiration for the younger Muir.

Because Hall is tracing early environmentalism's family tree along particular branches, his focus settles upon a narrow selection of writers. However, Hall does occasionally diversify his text's understanding of Romanticism to include less canonical writers like Henry Crabb Robinson, and he acknowledges the collaborative work of Dorothy and William, noting important records of close natural observation in the *Alfoxden Journal* so that 'the Wordsworths' (12) are jointly credited in the early sections of his book. When turning attention to American early environmentalists, Hall in similar spirit redresses the imbalanced hierarchy traditionally perceived between Emerson, Marsh and Muir so that, in Hall's study, the 'Sierran naturalist' (23) no longer trails neglected at the bottom of that chain, and instead inspiration between them is shown to flow 'bidirectionally' (23).

In his examination of the intersections of literature and science, of cultural and natural-historical works, Hall necessarily encounters questions of 'nature' as a social construction built in the Romantic period. Hall engages William Cronon and Scott Hess's

post-structuralist arguments in energetic conversation, and his rejoinder is to advocate a critical approach that ‘put[s] the stuff back into nature’ (24). This methodology is at play not only in the book’s analyses of texts which notice detail and interaction within a locale or habitat, but is also apparent in Hall’s writing, as replete with natural-historical fact as it is rich with literary and cultural reference.

Hall’s breadth of allusion frequently takes in current-day environmental campaigns in light of initial Romantic-period concerns. While always avoiding anachronism, subtle connections are drawn between, for example, White, Wordsworth and Emerson’s observations about climate and recent ecocatastrophes. The implication is that Romantic naturalists and early environmentalists bequeathed a living legacy, more tangibly evident in the National Trust and National Parks’ preservation of open spaces. Hall’s book addresses ‘Romantic naturalist’ texts with a sense of urgency borne out of the climate crisis of our own time, and documents with fresh attention the role of Romantic literature in motivating environmentalism from its earliest inception.

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