

**Randolph Vigne, *Thomas Pringle: South African Pioneer, Poet and Abolitionist*. Woodbridge and Rochester: James Currey, 2012. Pp. 270. \$80. ISBN 9781847010520.**

Samuel Taylor Coleridge's high estimation of Thomas Pringle's poem 'Afar in the Desert' is not one that critical opinion would share today. Its interest, therefore, lies in what it adds to our understanding of Coleridge's criticism, and in what it suggests about the interest to metropolitan Romanticism of the colonial encounter. 'Afar in the Desert' wobbles between a picturesque cosiness of address and an attempt at drawing a subject in a sublime landscape. Its traveller canters metrically through an African 'wilderness', amazed at the antic creation about him. He considers himself alone, despite the presence of 'the silent bushboy alone by my side', and is prompted to an epiphany with Biblical resonances. Now we would ask: what of the 'bushboy'; what of the project of the English traveller in that land; what of the schedule he makes of its resources; what of the language he binds it with to, or under the servitude in which the 'bushboy' now travels mutely alongside him? In many ways such problems characterise much of Pringle's short life, make it interesting, and exemplary of the challenges and contradictions of humanitarian engagement in the early decades of the nineteenth century.

Randolph Vigne comes to Pringle with the qualifications of a longstanding scholarly familiarity with his subject, as well as a shared politics in the 'liberal' legacy of Pringle's moment, at least as it is traced by that posterity in its self-imagining. His book is thorough, indispensable, fascinating and highly recommended. But it is not untroubled.

To sing the praises of the book is easy. Vigne's first task in coming to a man of parts, is to bring them into proximity, then order, then relation. He does this remarkably well, and for this reviewer (more familiar with the South African sojourn) most usefully. His coverage of the early years of entangled involvements in the cultural node of Edinburgh literary journalism is excellent. So, too, his handling of the later years of Pringle's Secretaryship to the Anti-Slavery Society, and as an editor of more than minor significance in the literary London of the late 1820s and early 1830s (a period Vigne rightly characterises as 'the least recorded, the most obscure'). Both stories place Pringle far closer to significant metropolitan initiatives than his otherwise 'role' as a colonial settler and versifier has formerly allowed. From the snakepit of Edinburgh journalism Pringle emerges as a resourceful and well-attuned literary broker; from the literary and humanitarian circles of a later London he emerges similarly, raised in stature. For a literary scholar this underscores the significance of Pringle's years as editor of *Friendship's Offering*, where he gave early publication to Tennyson and Ruskin, among others. It also raises questions about his own poetry, so full of potential and yet incapable of crossing the threshold of true Romanticism. But Vigne's biography is not intended to be a strictly literary one: the author's interests and scholarship are much more historically inclined.

Still, we deserve a deeper treatment of the poetry built around the indigene, and Vigne urges it. J.M. Coetzee has written (off) the picturesque obfuscations of 'Evening Rambles', a rose-tinted landscape, whose rustic cot seems transplanted from Nether Stowey. This is one half of it, as Vigne points out. The other half is a suite of poems engaging very peculiarly with indigenous people and their history (and in some instances becoming that history, or part of it, or conjoining colonial representations with indigenous ones). One of the signal virtues of Vigne's book is the ground it beaks for literary scholars now to go over.

Of criticisms. At times long sentences succumb to the semantic burden placed upon them. We feel the pressure of the biographer here, to compass the data of a life in the information of a book. It will not bother scholars to read carefully, but one frets a little at the work which might deter the lay readers this books deserves. More serious is the intrusion of a

kind of apologetics. The liberal cause has always been embattled in South Africa, since Pringle's time in the (very) brief heyday of the humanitarian ascendancy, down through the decades of conscience in the mid-twentieth century, through the endgame of apartheid, and on into the contemporary muddle. How Pringle would have sat with this posterity is hard to tell, but neither he nor history is well-served by some of Vigne's more slippery accommodations of Pringle's (and liberalism's) contradictions. A similar problem bedevils the word 'pioneer' in the book's title. It certainly applies to Pringle's political allegiances and engagements, and to his role as a poet in English. But most people are going to read that word 'pioneer' as a cipher of colonial settlement, and justly object to the priority it accords to that narrative in the constitution of a contested and conflictual South African history.

For all this, Vigne has thoroughly pressed the claim of Pringle to an array of important contributions, and raised his stature, in a commanding and fascinating biography. From this distance, however, it appears that Pringle might serve posterity best if liberated from the liberal claim to him.

*P.R. Anderson*  
*University of Cape Town*