

Porscha Fermanis and John Regan, eds., *Rethinking British Romantic History, 1779-1845*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. Pp. 350. £60. ISBN 9780199687084.

Ben Dew and Fiona Price, eds., *Historical Writing in Britain 1688-1830: Visions of History*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. Pp. 228. £58. ISBN 9781137332639.

Thirty-three years after the publication of Jerome McGann's *The Romantic Ideology*, the pump of history-driven Romantic scholarship remains remarkably well primed. If a squeak had become audible in the first few years of this millennium, it has since disappeared under the lubricative pressure of what might be termed a 'historiographical turn' in Romantic studies. The two books under review make a significant contribution to this area of research. Where McGann, Levinson and their successors tended to focus on the historically-conditioned *reflexes* dictating the shape of ostensibly ahistorical works, these later studies are more interested in the *theories* and *methodologies* developed – tentatively, imaginatively, consciously – by writers in response to unanticipated and paradigm-shifting historical phenomena (including upheavals within the world of historical writing itself).

Although *Rethinking British Romantic History, 1779-1845* and *Historical Writing in Britain 1688-1830: Visions of History* share several concerns, there is very little direct overlap between the subject matter of individual chapters across the two books. This is an indication of the great variety of contributions to the two collections as well the potential for further investigation that still exists in this area. Chief among their shared concerns are: firstly, the challenge posed by new forms of historiography to the liberal, universalising and abstract variety of stadial history popularised by the writers of the Scottish Enlightenment (as well as the hybrid forms of stadial history which arose in response to these new developments); secondly, the ambivalent adoption of ideas and devices from literary genres (in particular, those associated with sentimentalism) by historical writers; thirdly, the rise of historical narratives written by and about women, and, fourthly, cross-cultural influences and discontinuities.

Where they differ is in the slightly more pronounced eagerness of *Rethinking British Romantic History* to stress the impact of literature on historical discourse (as opposed to the other way round). Indeed, one of the stated aims of the collection is 'to demonstrate that "history" in Britain, as we know it today, arose alongside and even *within* the kinds of cultural practices that also transformed the literature and other art forms of the period in which literature was a perceptible force' (4). This mild and carefully-worded partiality is not wholly attributable to the fact that all of its contributors are literary scholars (in contrast with *Historical Writing in Britain*, which, alongside chapters by researchers in British literature, also features essays by an art historian, common-or-garden historians and a specialist in French literature). It arises additionally from an implicit desire to offer a more constructive appraisal of the historical value of Romantic literature than it generally received at the hands of the New Historicists.

Another respect in which the two books diverge from one another lies in the greater reluctance of Dew and Price to frame the essays of their collection in terms of a single, overarching narrative, suggesting that 'the complexities of the vast array of historical genres and subgenres [...] mean that any sort of generalisation concerning "history" has become dangerous' (6). Their solution is to present the essays in terms of that most unliterary-critical of genres: the case study (6). This is a strategy that works well within the context of a book which brings several different disciplinary perspectives into play, and a move that also hints

that the accommodations and tensions subsisting between the literary and historical discourses of the long eighteenth century are still detectable in their twenty-first century equivalents.

The need for brevity means that I cannot do justice to the many eye-opening and fascinating discoveries offered by both books, but instead must single out a few highlights. To *Rethinking British Romantic History*, Fermanis contributes a chapter on Carlyle, whose work embodies the complex ‘ambivalence’ and ‘adjustments’ which characterised the relationship between litterateurs and historians during the period. Fermanis renders a Carlyle who was repelled by the unreality of fiction but drawn to its rhetorical strategies and its emphasis on interiority; a writer who self-consciously speculated on the hidden thoughts of his subjects – even momentarily writing in the first-person as if he were Oliver Cromwell – yet nevertheless viewed himself as ‘a professional, empirical historian’ (111-12). Also worthy of note is Christopher Bundock’s essay, ‘Historicism, Temporalization, and Romantic Prophecy in Percy Shelley’s *Hellas*’, in which it is suggested that the sense of ‘intense discontinuity in historical experience’ (149) provoked by the French Revolution persuaded commentators that ‘historical events are no longer just the content of a narrative that transcends and subsumes them but, rather, are capable of exercising a force on the form of their conceptualization’ (146). In a chapter on Byron’s *Don Juan*, Richard Cronin draws a compelling distinction between ‘deep and shallow time’ as a way of making sense of the seemingly contradictory desire of early nineteenth-century readers for both ephemera and tradition (165-79). Byron also comes under the scrutiny of Paul Hamilton, who considers the relationship between style and history not only in the work of Byron but in that of Clare too. Hamilton notes: ‘writers can manipulate the artificiality of an aesthetic expression to criticize the historical viewpoint from which it was natural to use that expression. Where we cannot do this, we are subject to history in a different, inescapable manner’ (224). For Hamilton, Byron is ‘an example of the first kind of writer’ and Clare ‘an example of the second’ (224). If one caveat could be expressed here, it is that while Byron was a writer whose imagination thrived on the nuanced gradations of social, historical and cultural differences part of the power of Clare’s writing lies in its robust rejection of taxonomy: be it botanical or linguistic. Thus while Hamilton’s alignment of stylistic variation and historical escape works well for Byron, it seems less appropriate for Clare, in spite of the latter’s admiration for and occasional imitation of the older poet.

In *Historical Writing in Britain*, Sanja Perovic’s essay on the ‘divided legacy’ of the French historian, Constantin-François Volney (1757-1820), comprises an intriguing account of a writer who inspired the lyrical visions of Blake and Shelley in Britain while at the same time leading the charge in France towards a more scientific and ‘objective’ form of historical discourse. A comparably contradictory writer is the focus of Charlotte Roberts’ essay, in which William Robertson (1721-93), whose apparent paradoxical attachment both to the antiquarian desire for facts and the stadial historian’s attachment to ‘theoretical systems of explanation’, is seen to embody a ‘tension emblematic in eighteenth-century British history’ (110). In ‘Female Worthies and the Genres of Women’s History,’ Philip Hicks reveals how a literary mode (biography) held out to authors the means to write women back into history while simultaneously ‘straitjacketing’ them within the confines of a single genre (28). Price’s chapter on historical fiction written in the interim between the French Revolution and the publication of *Waverley* – a body of work which paints a less ameliorative picture of commercial society than that offered by Scott (158) – is also highly deserving of attention. Finally, Noelle Gallagher reads Godwin’s sentimental historiography in the context of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century responses to *Don Quixote*. Cervantes’ knight, for Godwin, embodied the archetype of the ideal sentimental reader, whose emotional engagement with texts ‘blurs genre distinctions’ (174), including those dividing literature from history, in a

potentially subversive way. In light of this, suggests Gallagher, *Caleb Williams* might be read as a ‘depiction of failed quixotic readers [which] posits sympathetic engagement with texts as well as people as the only effective form of resistance against a mode of historical progress that will otherwise obliterate the potential for quixotic benevolence’ (175). More straightforwardly literary arguments such as this are all the more persuasive for being offset by the work of historians such as Robertson. This is one of the great strengths of *Historical Writing in Britain*.

These volumes might most productively be read alongside one another. Where the Oxford University Press collection seeks to develop a more literature-friendly approach to historical scholarship than that associated with New Historicism, the Palgrave Macmillan collection opens up a cooperative dialogue between literary critics and historians: something that, as Fermanis and Regan note, the New Historicists failed to achieve (1). Together, the two volumes significantly widen the scope for future research in this area.

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