

**Jacqueline Mulhallen, *Percy Bysshe Shelley: Poet and Revolutionary*. London: Pluto Press, 2015. Pp. 170. Pb. £12.99. ISBN 9780745334615.**

This concise biography of Percy Bysshe Shelley focuses on highlighting the radical elements of its protagonist's life and opinions, and it offers a clear and detailed analysis of the development and culmination of Shelley's political ideology. The most salient element of this ideology, and the thread that runs through Mulhallen's account of Shelley's life, is the struggle towards equality that comes across in all the examples of Shelley's literary output introduced in the book. Mulhallen draws connections between the contents of Shelley's political views and the state of affairs in today's world, which on the one hand establishes the extent to which Shelley's thinking was ahead of his time, and on the other hand displays his influence on later activists.

Shelley's views are placed in their historical context through the substantial consideration Mulhallen gives to the political climate of the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries, as well as to specific writers whose views Shelley found compelling. One of the major points in this regard is the enormous impact of the French Revolution on British society. Mulhallen describes the initially positive reaction of both the ruling class and the working class to the Revolution, but she also depicts the plight of those impacted by the after-effects of the war, such as the wave of unemployment made worse for many by industrialisation. Shelley was greatly influenced by Thomas Paine and his arguments in favour of the people's right to revolution in the face of a corrupt government, as well as his championing of more equal distribution of public wealth. Written in the aftermath of the Peterloo massacre, Shelley's own essay on the subject of necessary changes to the political system, *A Philosophical View of Reform*, also takes many of its ideas regarding the specific measures proposed in order to move towards a more equal society from William Cobbett.

One of the principles strongly advocated by both Cobbett and Shelley, and a subject related to the question of equality, was freedom of religion, which in Shelley's case culminated in his strong support for Catholic emancipation and his radically open atheism, on the grounds of which he was expelled from Oxford. Both are at the forefront of Mulhallen's portrayal of Shelley's worldview, together with the poet's startlingly modern stance on women's position in society. This stance is reflected in his opposition to the institution of marriage, which he found oppressive to women. It was a view Shelley had adopted from his future father-in-law, William Godwin.

The great influence of Paine, Cobbett, and Godwin on Shelley's political views has been established by previous biographers, but Mulhallen adds to these a strong emphasis on Shelley's connection with Quakers, to whom, according to her, he 'owed much of his own political education' (128). By simultaneously emphasising Shelley's connection with Quakers and his ardent atheism, Mulhallen is able to highlight the complex network of ideologies that moulded Shelley's worldview. The picture that emerges is that of a man deeply committed to advancing the rights of disenfranchised groups within the society. It is also made clear, that while he did not encourage the use of violence in order to achieve changes in society, Shelley was not opposed to it as a last resort.

At the end of the book, Mulhallen notes that Shelley was greatly admired by Marx and Engels, and she draws attention to the similarities between Shelley's idea of a republic and that of Trotsky. This rather cements the impression created of an early prototype of a socialist – albeit Mulhallen is careful to emphasise that 'Shelley died too early to be even a Utopian socialist [...] and certainly too early to be a Marxist' (130). Other groups that have since drawn influence from Shelley are also mentioned, among them the suffragettes and the Rolling Stones. Mulhallen also draws connections between the world in the early nineteenth century and in our day, as when she compares the fight of the Spanish colonies against the

oppressive motherland to the Vietnam War, or when she highlights the relevance of what Shelley called the “double aristocracy of landowners and bankers and stockbrokers” (135) to today’s class system.

In addition to shedding light on the development of Shelley’s political views, Mulhallen dedicates a great amount of her book to analysis of Shelley’s literary productions, offering several insights into his lesser-known works. The most thorough attention is given to the satirical drama *Swellfoot the Tyrant*; a play based on the trial of Queen Caroline that highlights the oppression of the people by the elite. Mulhallen ends the book by calling for a more equal distribution of the funds allocated to the arts, which seems a fitting conclusion to a book about a poet whose career was dedicated to championing social equality.

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