

Franca Dellarossa, *Talking Revolution: Edward Rushton's Rebellious Poetics, 1782-1814*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2014. Pp. 238. £75. ISBN 9781781381441.

Paul Baines, ed., *The Collected Writings of Edward Rushton*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2014. Pp. 348. £75. ISBN 9781781381366.

Edward Rushton (1756-1814) was in every sense an original talent. An authentically working-class philanthropist, a staunch English radical who never wavered in the face of popular conservatism during the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, and an unswerving abolitionist based in Liverpool, the European capital of the slave trade; his is not a story that fits comfortably into the ur-narratives of the Romantic period. Possibly as a result of his singular nature, Rushton has been largely neglected by scholars for much of the past century. Now, with the publication of Franca Dellarossa's superb monograph, accompanied by the first modern volume of his collected works (painstakingly edited by Paul Baines), this unique and – in so many senses – *disruptive* voice is once again considered with the seriousness it demands.

In about 1766, Rushton, aged 10, the son of a Liverpool barber, went to sea as a ship's boy aboard a West-India merchantman. Seven years later, he returned to his home town, blinded by a contagious form of ophthalmia he had caught while tending to one of the slaves being transported aboard his ship. A tenacious autodidact, he paid a boy to read him selections from 'the best essayists', including Addison, Steele and Johnson, and embarked on his own writing career around 1781.

At the most general level, throughout all of his poetry and prose, Rushton was interested primarily in the experiences of the dispossessed. As Dellarossa writes, 'the assumption of the marginal as the privileged focus and the exploration of the potential for agency of those who spend their lives in the margins are a central concern in Rushton's poetry' (50). How this was manifested in relation to Liverpool's maritime working classes forms the focus for the first half of Dellarossa's analysis. Rushton's experiences as a seaman gave his trenchant political radicalism – associated during this period in Liverpool more with a particular subset of the liberal finance-capitalist bourgeoisie than the shop-keeping, or indeed ordinary seafaring classes – the fairly unique appeal of genuine, locally-inflected authenticity. In 'Seamen's Nursery' (1794) and 'Will Clewline' (1801), for example, the sentimental discourse of familial or romantic separation was framed by the abusive conditions of seafaring and the constant threat of impressment, respectively. Similarly, in 'The Tender's Hold' (1794), Rushton called attention to the irony that Britain's constitutional 'freedom', much vaunted by conservative ideologues, was in fact defended by the unfree labour of impressed working-class sailors: 'While landmen wander uncontroul'd, / And boast the rights of freemen, / O! view the Tender's loathsome hold, / Where droop your injur'd seamen; / Dragg'd by oppression's savage grasp, / From every dear connexion' (Rushton, 87). While these anxieties might appear at first to apply equally to any port town during the wartime years of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Dellarossa demonstrates that Rushton's poetics respond to the very specific cultural and material conditions of Liverpool. For example, in an illuminating reading of 'To a Redbreast in November' (1806), she teases out the metaphor of a Robin's 'warbling strain' (Rushton, 116) as representative of a vulnerable and unrepresented urban proletariat straining to be heard against a discordant 'fetishisation of capital' and, particularly, the industrialised violence financially undergirding colonial slavery (Dellarossa, 38-42). Her invocation of Ian Baucom's *Specters of the Atlantic* is particularly instructive in this context.

Partly because of this focus on the working-class experience, much of Rushton's poetry took the form of the popular ballad or the irregular ode. His work, as Baines suggests in his introduction to the *Collected Works*, 'had a genuine popular edge, like a sort of authored folksong' (Rushton, 4). Indeed, the intentionally popular nature of Rushton's ballads (and of course the obvious factor of his acquired blindness) led him to draw upon musicality and lyricism as expressions of the Romantic subjective self. As Dellarossa puts it, caught 'in between orality and print culture, but also music and text, narrative and lyric modes, Rushton's experience of writing has Romantic generic contamination as its own underlying generative principle' (49). In this sense, Rushton's work remains rebellious even divorced from its (highly compelling) historicity.

Of course, Rushton's 'rebellious poetics' were not entirely confined to the banks of the River Mersey. Indeed, revolution in a global context was to prove the topic to which he returned most often. In this respect it is possible to chart two distinct phases to his political trajectory, straddling a creative hiatus stretching from about 1783 to 1787. Dellarossa describes him as 'fully entangled in a pro-imperial stance' during his earlier, 1781-82 phase, unable to break free from the parent-child paradigm characteristic of anti American independence political rhetoric (133). Works such as 'To the People of England' (1781) and 'The Dismember'd Empire' (1782) were at times reliant on this rhetoric, though hints of his later anti-imperialist (and especially anti-slavery) agenda were already palpable: 'Britons first aspir'd to govern slaves / and hurl'd destruction 'cross th' Atlantic waves; / [...] freedom's boasted sons, elate with pride, / Deny'd to others what themselves enjoy'd' (Rushton, 33). However, beginning with his abolitionist 'West Indian Eclogues' (1787) and spanning the rest of his corpus, Rushton 'revealed extreme, tenacious consistency in his dedication to radical libertarian, anti-slavery, republican, anti-war and anti-imperialist beliefs' (Dellarossa, 101). In an unconventional 'interlude' between the fourth and fifth chapters, Dellarossa very convincingly hypothesises that the 'watershed' moment in Rushton's political development was the *Zong* massacre of 1781, in which around 140 enslaved Africans were needlessly drowned by the ship's crew during the middle passage (127-141). For Rushton, this case served as the catalyst for a new commitment to the antislavery and anti-imperial writing for which he is now best remembered.

Undoubtedly, Rushton's abolitionist work ranks among his most politically radical. In the four 'West Indian Eclogues', for example, the 'progression from the first section to the last implies a movement from the wish for violent rebellion to its enactment by another [enslaved] actor in an unrelated situation' (Dellarossa, 156). Similarly, 'Briton, and a Negro Slave' (1806), 'Toussaint to his Troops' (1806) and 'The Coromantees' (1824) invoke the violent, insurrectionary potential of oppressed slaves. Comparable themes were threaded through most of his prose works. It was an act of almost unimaginable effrontery for Rushton to write his *Expostulatory Letter to George Washington, of Mount Vernon, Virginia, on his continuing to be a Proprietor of Slaves* (1797), in which he claimed that the former President's 'present reputation, future fame, and all that is estimable among the virtuous, are for a few thousand pieces of yellow dirt, irremediably renounced' (Rushton, 189). Relatedly, his *Attempt to Prove that Climate, Food and Manners, are not the Causes of the Dissimilarity of Colour in the Human Species* (1824), sadly not discussed at length in Dellarossa's book, will be of particular interest to scholars of the intersection of racial and radical thought.

These two volumes will make a significant contribution to restoring Rushton's work to centre-stage in future studies of Romantic-era writing and political culture. As Baines pointed out at the 2014 conference marking both the bicentenary of Rushton's death and the publication of these books, the attempt to collect, collate and rationalise the fugitive poetry of a figure whose work was often ephemeral, unattributed or reproduced without permission on either side of the Atlantic was a formidable one. The scale of this undertaking is evidenced by

the 102 pages of commentary that accompany the works themselves. Dellarossa's monograph, meanwhile, represents the first book-length study on Rushton's work to appear in modern scholarship. While it would perhaps have been nice to see some more attention given to, for example, Rushton's writings about women (his poems, whether nominally about sailors, the Irish rebellion of 1798 or plantation slavery, demonstrate a constant anxiety about rape and female marital infidelity), Dellarossa is absolutely right to prioritise the prevalence of rebellion and radicalism in his work. At its core, Rushton's work, as a philanthropist, a bookseller, an editor, an essayist and a poet, was always about power and its abuses.

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