

**Marie Mulvey-Roberts, ed., *Literary Bristol: Writers and the City*. Bristol: Redcliffe Press, 2015. Pp. 224. Pb. £15. ISBN 978908326737.**

Consider the nature of a city. It is a vast repository of time, the discarded times of all the men and women who have lived, worked, dreamed and died in the streets which grow like a wilfully organic thing, unfurl like the petals of a mired rose and yet lack evanescence so entirely that they preserve the past in haphazard layers, so this alley is old while the avenue that runs beside it is newly built but nevertheless has been built over the deep-down, dead-in-the ground relics of the older, perhaps the original, huddle of alleys which germinated the entire quarter.

This passage from an Angela Carter novel, quoted by Marie Mulvey-Roberts (29), serves wonderfully as a keynote to the book as a whole. The eight chapters, which cover a 250 year range of Bristol writers from Thomas Chatterton (born 1752) to Diana Wynne Jones (died 2011), accumulate like the historical layers Carter describes, showing the city within the city, the palimpsest of impressions created by the imagination of its inhabitants. The chapters work best when they enter this imaginative space through the eyes of their subject authors. By and large the book transcends parochial championing, and Catherine Butler's final chapter rounds off the book brilliantly by looking critically at the pros and cons of tying literature, or authors, to a specific place.

Writing for *The BARS Review*, I feel duty bound to dwell on the chapters about Romantics, but before doing so I commend this book as a whole. It is lavishly illustrated (with 15 colour plates), greater than the sum of its parts, and a bargain at £15. The later chapters: Chiara Briganti and Kathy Meizi on E. H. Young, Dawn Fowler on the Bristol New Wave Dramatists, Zoe Brennan on Angela Carter's 'Bristol Trilogy', and Catherine Butler on Diana Wynne Jones are all well worth reading.

Mulvey-Roberts' 'Gothic Bristol: City of Darkness and Light' sets the scene that the book goes on to populate. The fourteenth-century Perpendicular Gothic church of St Mary Redcliffe is linked nicely to Bristol's Gothic revival buildings to show 500 years of atmospheric continuity. On the cliffs above the old city, Clifton, a bright and new Spa town in the late 1790s, had by the 1960s decayed into Angela Carter's 'twilight region of one-room flats [with] a leprous and mice-nibbled look' (174). The port below, so central to the city's prosperity, gave Bristol its 'dark legacy of the slave trade' (29) and its reputation as the mercantile city which let its boy-genius Chatterton starve.

John Goodridge's chapter shows how John Gregory (1832–1922), shoemaker, poet, and socialist, responded to the Chatterton myth. St Mary Redcliffe, whose pillars were 'arborescent monsters' (111) to Gregory, is brought into the present age by Goodridge as a 'Gothic spaceship' (115) haunted by the excluded Chatterton. May the generous and benevolent spirit of John Gregory himself (previously unknown to me, and so well captured here) continue to haunt Bristol as pervasively.

Kerri Andrews uses Ann Yearsley's troubled relationship with her patronised definition as the 'Bristol Milkwoman' – a label which confines her geographically and socially – to enrich the discussion of sense of place that pervades the entire book. Andrews demonstrates how adroitly Yearsley manoeuvred in her verse to transcend these categories, speaking to, and on behalf of Bristol, ironizing and satirizing the identity imposed on her, to create a 'liberating space' (103) within the 'place' her readers thought she had been allotted.

Of the Romantic authors, Robert Southey fares particularly well. Mulvey-Roberts discusses his Gothic verse (41-47), an under-appreciated aspect of this prolific and versatile author, and Robin Jarvis' chapter, 'Bristol's Romantic Poets: Robert Southey and Samuel Taylor Coleridge', gives most space to the former, which affords Jarvis the opportunity – in a

short chapter that needs to cater for the non-specialist – to cover new ground. Southey haunts the Avon Gorge rocks and caverns above Bristol in particular. His 1797 poem ‘Inscription for a Cavern that Overlooks the River Avon’, appositely illustrated by a Turner painting on the same subject (74), leads Jarvis to describe an inverted inscription genre where ‘the place or natural object [...] addresses an imaginary passer by – and by extension the reader’ (72). This cavern appears in Southey’s *Common-Place Book* as part of a projected poem about St Vincent’s Rocks, which overlook Bristol and the Avon Gorge: ‘It might begin by saying why I ought to celebrate them. The camp, my cavern, the legend of the building to which there leads no path, Cook’s folly and its tale, the suicide at Sea-Mills, Trenchard and Gordon. Chatterton. Bristol too might have its fame’ (73-4). That poem was never written, but Bristol – through books such as this one – has its fame.

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