

**Andrew Bennett, ed., *William Wordsworth in Context*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. Pp. 331. £65. ISBN 9781316239827.**

**Robert M. Ryan, *Charles Darwin and the Church of Wordsworth*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. Pp. 209. £55. ISBN 9780198757351.**

In the Preface to *William Wordsworth in Context*, Andrew Bennett claims that ‘Wordsworth lived longer than any other major British writer of the Romantic period’ (xvii). Admirers of Laetitia Barbauld and Hannah More would, one expects, rush to add the qualifier ‘male’ to this assertion, and Samuel Rogers’s devotees would no doubt wish to contest Bennett’s contention outright. Yet, notwithstanding the significance of such qualifications, there is an element of truth to Bennett’s claim. Of the six male writers canonically associated with British Romanticism, Wordsworth stands foremost both in terms of the longevity of his career and in terms of his reputation (especially in his later years) as a cultural authority.

The chapters that comprise *William Wordsworth in Context* offer an illuminating and insightful survey of both of these aspects of Wordsworth’s career: its duration and, more significantly, its relation to his era. These chapters have been contributed by thirty-five internationally notable scholars, all of whom draw on areas of particular expertise to provide succinct historical examinations of Wordsworth’s life, his influence and reception, and the cultural contexts that conditioned (and, in some instances, were reciprocally conditioned by) his works. In this way, Bennett’s collection *William Wordsworth in Context* makes for a useful companion to Richard Gravil and Daniel Robinson’s *Oxford Handbook to William Wordsworth* (2015), which contains complementary accounts of Wordsworth’s literary career and cultural legacy. More especially, though, the chapters of *William Wordsworth in Context* are brought together by a common interest in Wordsworth’s dual identity as both an introspective chronicler of the self and as an outward-looking commentator on (and, occasionally, a participant in) key events and discourses that now define our conception of Romantic and Victorian British culture.

This ‘dichotomy of self and society’, as Bennett describes it in his ‘Preface’ (xvii), is central to the conversation developed across the four sections into which the chapters of this collection are subdivided. The first section (‘Life and Writings’), for example, features contributions by Sally Bushell, Stephen Gill, Susan Levin, Tim Milnes, and Judith Page, who locate Wordsworth’s writings not only within his individual quest as a poet to ‘take full possession of his own life’ (7), but also within the communities – both familial and artistic – that supported and sustained the development of his verse. In the second section (‘Reception and Influence’) Richard Cronin, David Higgins, Maureen McLane, Michael O’Neill, and Peter Simonsen offer not only a complementary discussion of Wordsworth’s critical reception between 1793 and 1850, but also a welcome assessment of his influence on modern and contemporary Anglo-American verse. Following on from this consideration of Wordsworth’s poetic legacy, the next section (‘Literary Traditions’), locates his writings within a number of distinct literary contexts. Here one finds chapters by James Chandler, Daniel Cook, David Fairer, Paul Fry, Kevin Goodman, Samantha Matthews, Daniel Robinson, Ann Wierda Rowland, and Joshua Wilner, who provide concise accounts of the specific modes (*autobiography*, *elegy*, *epitaph*, *pastoral*, *georgic*), forms (*ballad*, *sonnet*), and conventions (*sensibility*) that shaped and were shaped by Wordsworth’s literary undertakings.

The fourth and final section of the collection (‘Cultural and Historical Contexts’) is by far

the longest, and this is certainly understandable given the diverse array of topics it covers. Ranging from philosophy to politics to nature and the environment (to say nothing of the chapters devoted to religion, language, and aesthetics) this section brings together contributions by Stuart Allen, Simon Bainbridge, Tony Benis, John Bugg, Michael Ferber, Frances Ferguson, Kurt Fosso, Scott Hess, Simon Jarvis, Noel Jackson, Alexander Regier, Jonathan Roberts, Philip Shaw, Christopher Stokes, Sophie Thomas, and Anne Wallace. The chapters in this section work together to situate Wordsworth within his immediate cultural milieu. Particularly noteworthy is Frances Ferguson's chapter 'Education', which reads Wordsworth into the context of the disputes that 'raged between the supporters of' the system of 'free education' championed by Joseph Lancaster, on the one hand, and the proponents of the 'Madras System' promoted by Andrew Bell, on the other (233). Readers interested in the field of critical animal studies will be pleased by the inclusion of Fosso's chapter 'Animals', while scholars of nineteenth-century visual culture will enjoy Sophie Thomas's contribution: 'Spectacle, Painting and the Visual'.

Collectively, then, *William Wordsworth in Context* fulfils the brief of Cambridge University Press's *In Context* series by providing succinct and accessible accounts of key biographical, literary, and cultural contexts of which readers of Wordsworth's poetry should be aware. The collection is suitable for a broad scholarly audience, but its short chapters make it a particularly appropriate resource for advanced undergraduate and for postgraduate students. In addition to its chapters, the book includes a concise chronology of the period 1770 to 1850, and it is supplemented with a well-selected list of recommended further reading. Still, there are some limitations to this collection: notably, the variety of scholarly voices represented. An inventory of the contributors to the volume is telling in this regard. Of the thirty-six scholars whose work is represented, nineteen are based in North America, fifteen in Great Britain, and one in Denmark. The inclusion of perspectives from a more global community of researchers would have made this collection even more valuable. Equally, though *William Wordsworth in Context* covers a remarkable range of topics, given the historicist bent of the collection one is surprised to see little attention paid to the colonial and imperial contexts of Wordsworth's poetry. More attention might have been paid, furthermore, to the way Wordsworth's poetry was mobilised in the broader social and political debates that defined nineteenth-century British culture. Several important events (including the Reform Act of 1832 and the Abolition Act of 1833) receive little or no attention, and a number of the significant spiritual and scientific concerns of the period – including those occasioned by the theories of Robert Chambers, Charles Lyell, and Charles Darwin – are passed over in silence.

Readers interested in this latter subject will be especially keen to read Robert Ryan's *Charles Darwin & the Church of Wordsworth*. A concise and compelling study, Ryan's book distinguishes Wordsworth and Darwin as the authors of the 'two great totalizing visions of nature' (9) that set the terms for one of the more consequential cultural debates in Victorian Britain: the contest between Christianity and modern science. Essentially, Ryan's book is a study in intellectual and cultural history, and it is less concerned with Wordsworth and Darwin as individuals than it is with the way their ideas helped to shape two distinctive ways of understanding nature: the 'Wordsworthian', signifying a 'vision of the natural world as harmonious, instinct with divinity, and a source of moral inspiration' (6); and the 'Darwinian', indicating a conflicting 'vision of "nature red in tooth and claw" that [...] remove[d] divine creative and supervisory activity from the continuing life' of the natural world (57). The five chapters of Ryan's book explore these contrasting understandings of nature, considering both their particular influence on Victorian society and the incompatible social and political ideas they

helped to stimulate. Especially significant, though, are Ryan's third and fifth chapters, which collectively account for the 'persistence of a Wordsworthian vision of nature in the post-Darwinian world' (157).

In delving into this latter topic, *Charles Darwin & the Church of Wordsworth* makes a meaningful and substantial addition to the study of Wordsworth's influence on Victorian culture. In particular, Ryan's book helps to close a gap in the account of Wordsworth's legacy documented in Stephen Gill's foundational monograph *Wordsworth and the Victorians* (1998). A significant omission in Gill's study, as Ryan notes, is the scant attention it pays to the significance of Darwin's theories in helping to increase Wordsworth's cultural prominence during the 1860s and 1870s. By tracing the way that Wordsworth's poetry and ideas helped to bolster a counter argument to the Darwinian worldview, Ryan helps to explain concretely what Gill's study only formulates conjecturally: namely, that '[t]o many readers Wordsworth's poetry offered not quite a substitute for religion but an alternative realm in which religious sensibilities could operate' (Gill qt. in Ryan, 80).

*Charles Darwin & the Church of Wordsworth* is thus, on the whole, an important work of scholarship. It offers a fresh perspective on a major chapter in modern British history, and it weaves together an impressive array of primary and secondary sources in the process. That said, the book does contain lapses of the sort of myopia that often befalls literary scholars when they engage in the writing of cultural history: Ryan's dubious claim that 'Wordsworth was the most influential religious thinker in [Victorian] Britain' (7) is a case in point. Wordsworth's influence was certainly pervasive, but such a categorical assertion seems at best incautious, especially in a study that overlooks individuals (such as Samuel Wilberforce) who played a much more direct role in challenging the theories of Darwin and his followers. Notwithstanding such limitations, Ryan's book is a profitable read, both for Wordsworth scholars and for scholars of nineteenth-century culture.

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