

J. A. Downie, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of the Eighteenth-Century Novel*. Oxford University Press, 2016. Pp 595. £95. ISBN 9780199566747.

This imposing Oxford Handbook contains 34 chapters on various aspects of the novel across the long eighteenth century (c. 1660-1830), with a list of contributors that doubles as a who's who of major voices in the field: many of the essays within (such as Peter Sabor's on the *Pamela* controversy) serve as useful abstracts of book-length work. Given the project's scope, the results are inevitably somewhat uneven, leading to some repetitions and contradictions: the same statistics on increasing literacy, for instance, are cited at least three times by different writers (12, 23, 53), while J. A. Downie's introduction casts doubt on whether any such increase can be proven at all (xxii-xxiii). Several chapters struggle with the compression the format requires, leaving their intended audience unclear. A number of others, however, provide lively introductions to texts and debates while also putting forward a clear line of argument: just a few examples include Cynthia Wall on travel literature, Gillian Dow on cross-Channel relationships between France and England (which, despite its placement in the volume, covers the entire period to 1830), Antonia Forster on book reviews, and Scott Black on 'Henry Fielding and the Progress of Romance.'

With any such wide-ranging survey, however, the temptation is to cavil with its organising structure and framing, and this is where both the volume's greatest strengths and weaknesses ultimately lie. The book is divided into two halves, spanning the years 1660-1770 and 1770-1830; both begin with several chapters focusing on social and book-trade contexts, before a main section of case studies titled (respectively) 'Early "Novels" and Novelists' and 'Novels and Novelists, 1770-1830.' The scare quotes in the first title prove significant. Although Downie's introduction states that it is not the purpose of this volume to define what a 'novel' is, he does take issue with the established narratives of its 'rise' (xxiii). One important consequence is to post-date the real emergence of the novel to the end rather than the beginning of the eighteenth century, to be fully institutionalised only in the 1820s. This tends to make the titular 'eighteenth-century novel' a retreating target, and leaves the *Handbook's* coverage of its first 110 years a poor second to the following 60; even in the earlier chapters, there is always a tendency to look forward rather than back.

Moreover, by taking as its starting point the canon-forming efforts of the nineteenth century (such as the *British Novelists* and Bentley's *Standard Novels*), the volume's handling of the 1660-1770 period also tends to reproduce some of their prejudices. Several essays stress that 'Later histories of the novel have made room for a broader selection of writers, especially female authors such as Aphra Behn, Delarivier Manley, Penelope Aubin, and Eliza Haywood' (58), who are 'now widely recognised as important early English novelists' (77) and 'established influential narrative conventions and professional strategies' (175). Yet this reorientation is not reflected in the *Handbook* itself, which mentions these writers only as part of a cloud of 'non-literary or sub-literary' contexts (138), influences, and imitators surrounding the usual pantheon of Defoe, Richardson, Fielding, and Sterne. David Oakleaf's somewhat misleadingly-titled 'Testing the Market: *Robinson Crusoe* and After' is actually about the joint impact of Defoe and Haywood on the (largely female) writers of the 1720s, but overall fewer pages are devoted to these women combined than to *Gulliver's Travels*, a 'kissing cousin of the eighteenth-century novel' (187). This rather old-fashioned approach is emphasised by the fact that (perhaps owing to a lengthy production schedule) the *Handbook* makes no reference to any criticism published after 2010.

In its second half, however, the volume finds firmer footing. By focusing on defined subgenres (epistolary, sentimental, Jacobin and Anti-Jacobin, etc.), these chapters succeed far better in combining broad coverage with case studies of particular texts and prompts for further reading. This section therefore provides a picture of the novel that is much more genuinely

varied and less dominated by a few big names: Geoffrey Sill's excellent chapter on the novel of sentiment, for example, includes an account of Charlotte Lennox's *Sophia* and the works of Frances Burney alongside the more usual suspects. Even the expected essays on Jane Austen and Walter Scott (by Jan Fergus and Ina Ferris, respectively) situate their innovations as part of established genres of 'realist' and 'historical' novels. If, as Peter Garside writes here, the 1770-1830 period 'has been figured as a chasm in the history of novel' (388), then these dozen chapters constitute the *Oxford Handbook*'s best claim for inclusion in reading lists among a crowded field of 'rise of the novel' studies. At the same time, however, it represents a missed opportunity to live up to its professed aims of providing a comprehensive survey of 'the eighteenth-century English novel' in its entirety – whatever that may be.

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