

Ruth Livesey, *Writing the Stage Coach Nation: Locality on the Move in Nineteenth-Century British Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. Pp. 246. £50. ISBN 9780198769439.

A little more than midway through this fascinating study, Ruth Livesey poses a question that encapsulates the broader concern of her book: ‘What does it mean to write in an age when the means of receiving and distributing the written word are changing utterly and irrevocably before one’s eyes?’ (153). This question is, as Livesey suggests, timely. As the digital revolution continues to transform our daily practices, it is increasingly necessary for us to reflect on how innovations in communication technology are affecting the nature and substance of our scholarly work. More than this, though, as Livesey affirms, recognizing the technological innovations of our time can return us to our subject of study with a new curiosity about how past generations have responded to the innovations of their own times. The subject of Livesey’s book – literary responses to the rise and fall of Britain’s stagecoach system during the nineteenth century – is a case in point.

The analogical link that Henry Fielding (among others) forged between the thematics of the novel and the routines of stagecoach travel is well known. But, as Livesey elucidates, the stagecoach also proved integral to one of the most significant developments in nineteenth-century fiction: the rise of the novel of the recent past – of the time just within, or just beyond, living memory. From the *Waverley* novels to the *Wessex* novels, coaches and coach roads are recurrent figures through which writers explored the relation of the present to the past, and of national identity to local belonging. Within this context, as Livesey convincingly argues, the stagecoach obtained a profound significance as both an emblem for an increasingly mobile modernity and a metonymy for out-dated, but not irrelevant, patterns of geographical connection and communication.

Livesey develops this argument over six chapters, which are accompanied by a substantial introduction and conclusion. Taken together, these chapters form a series of chronologically linked case studies that carry the reader, in stages, from the heyday of the coaching age through to the period of its demise. Livesey’s first chapter considers the integration of stagecoaches and turnpikes in the narratives of the recent past spun in the novels of Sir Walter Scott. Livesey ranges across the *Waverley* novels, paying specific attention to *Waverley*, *The Antiquary* and *The Heart of Midlothian*, in order to clarify the importance of the stagecoach as a figure, setting and device in Scott’s fiction. Britain’s coaching system, as Livesey contends, is one of the key instruments Scott employs to stage the ‘local encounters’ that characterise his portrayal of the staggered, uneven nature of national modernity (32).

Livesey’s second chapter extends this discussion of Romantic-era responses to Britain’s stagecoach system. Here, she reads William Hazlitt’s ‘The Letter Bell’ alongside William Cobbett’s *Rural Rides*, and the cartoons and caricatures of William Heath, William Benbow and Thomas Howell Jones, in order to situate the stagecoach within the context of the 1820s. Livesey is principally concerned with contrasting Hazlitt’s and Cobbett’s responses to the ‘symbolic inscription’ of the stagecoach into late-Romantic political life (56). Whereas, Cobbett associates the stagecoach system with ‘tax gathering, financial speculation, and political corruption’, Hazlitt’s essay more optimistically embraces the stagecoach as ‘a means to imagine the abstract perfection of communication’ through which localities throughout the nation are put in contact with the metropolis and with one another (56, 73).

From here, Chapters 3 through 6 transition into the Victorian era in order to examine the depiction of coaches and coach travel in the novels of Charles Dickens, Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot. The richness of these chapters defies succinct summarisation, but in them Livesey offers a compelling account of the evolving significance of the stagecoach as a vehicle connected with the ‘parallel world of the continuous past’, on the one hand, and as ‘a highly

charged figure of a lost national modernity', on the other (2, 90). In her conclusion, Livesey draws this discussion to a close by considering Thomas Hardy's *The Woodlanders* alongside a selection of Dickens's later writings. Though comparatively brief, this concluding analysis further clarifies how the interment of the stagecoach system within the Victorian literary imagination created new possibilities for representing the relation of the local to the national.

Part of Livesey's purpose in spanning the 'long' nineteenth century in this manner is to challenge readings that write off Romantic and Victorian representations of the recent past as nostalgic. Such representations are, as Livesey shows, often much more than 'acts of rose-tinted nostalgia' (93); rather, they reflect a desire to resist uniform narratives of cultural progress. Even more than this, though, the broad chronological scope of Livesey's book reflects her interest in engaging with works that 'traverse [the] critical conceptualisation of developments of the novel during the Romantic and Victorian eras' (12). Livesey's willingness to work across literary periods in this way greatly enriches the value of this excellent and eloquently written study. One hopes that this aspect of Livesey's scholarship, and the integration of literary criticism, cultural history, and mobilities studies that her book models, will inspire other researchers to follow her lead.

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