

Jennifer Orr, *Literary Networks and Dissenting Print Culture in Romantic-Period Ireland*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave, 2015. Pp. xviii + 279. £55. ISBN 9781137471529.

Jennifer Orr's meticulously researched and elegantly written monograph challenges critical commonplaces and expands our appreciation for figures heretofore considered 'minor' or 'marginal'. Her argument reframes perspectives on Irish literature, Scottish literature, 'four nations' Romanticism, and laboring-class poetry. Balancing thoughtful close readings with a larger counter-narrative about Romantic-period Ulster, Orr focuses on the pivotal figure of Samuel Thomson, whose correspondence Orr has edited. Her study traces the activity of a vibrant coterie of Dissenting poets associated with Thomson. Unlike other literary critics of the period, however, Orr takes a longer view of Irish literary culture of the period: both leading up to 1798 and in the decades following the Act of Union. Joining scholars such as Anne Janowitz, Simon White, and John Goodridge, who emphasize community and sociability (as opposed to solitude and individual genius) as the wellspring of poetic creativity for laboring class writers, Orr demonstrates how the complex network of relationships among dissenting writers, intellectuals, and political activists shaped a unique northern cultural identity.

Thomson's work highlights 'the diversity of responses to failed revolution and Union among the poets...to emphasise that the political culture of Ireland...was not the only influential factor on Romantic-period print culture in that country' (11). In a similar fashion, Orr demonstrates not only how the poets in Thomson's circle paid homage to their British contemporaries, namely Wordsworth and Coleridge, but also how their work was more than 'a mirror to reflect the popularity of more well-known Romantic-period poets' (xii-xiii). What is uniquely compelling in Orr's discussion is its sustained treatment of how religion, mainly Presbyterianism, influenced politics and poetry for the Thomson circle. The introduction outlines the shifting interrelationship between political and religious dissent during the period between 1780 and 1815, which the remaining chapters then chronologically explore. Orr's argument, importantly, stresses how poetic form and style are as essential as content to the poets' nationalist cultural project.

Chapter 1 traces the beginnings of the Thomson circle, emphasizing how the discourse of the sentimental tradition, the form of the verse epistle, and the use of Scots dialect were instrumental in forging sociable bonds. Chapter 2 then considers more specifically Thomson's poetic self-fashioning as a laboring-class poet (even though, as a schoolmaster, he could be categorized as middle class). Thomson's poetic personae reveal his debt to a heterogeneous set of influences, including the georgic 'Cotter tradition' (via Burns, Gray, Goldsmith, and Crabbe), William Shenstone's poetry, and the bardic primitivism of Macpherson's *Ossian*. However, as Orr notes: 'The laboring-class aesthetic has offered...the potential to explore these poets' rich heritage in a variety of national models that extend beyond crude essentialist constructs of Irishness, Scottishness or Britishness' (81).

In chapter 3, Orr discusses political participation among Thomson's circle in the 1798 rebellion, focusing on their involvement with the *Northern Star* in the years preceding the uprising. Explicating poems that appeared in the newspaper, Orr demonstrates how conventional poetic forms, notably the pastoral, served as vehicle for radical rhetoric. While members of his circle were directly engaged with political unrest, due to his disdain for violence Thomson was more ambivalent. The aftermath of the rebellion led Thomson to silence himself until 1803, after which point his religious commitments dominated his writing.

The suppression of the *Northern Star* in 1797 compelled the members of the circle to seek other means to express their political disappointment, using more symbolic explorations of the topic of union. Thomson's pastorals from this period, addressed to John Williamson and discussed in chapter 4, use the theme of fraternal union to disguise subtle forms of protest. Likewise, Thomson's poems about nature, particularly those about animals such as 'To a Hedgehog', are exemplary of the work of his second collection, fusing 'together poetic and folk tradition, Enlightenment debates over natural history, and political resistance' (155).

Chapter 5 examines how religious trends, including millenarianism, affected poets in and around Ulster. Here Orr introduces a comparison between Thomson's work and that of Coleridge and Wordsworth. In his third collection *Simple Poems on a Few Subjects* (1806), Thomson represents nature and the suffering of the rural poor for theological as much as political purposes. In chapter 6, Orr then expands her analysis to investigate the interlinking network of literary coterie in and around Belfast, such as that of Bishop Percy. These literary circles overlapped like a Venn diagram of artistic sociability, relying upon the growing number of regional periodicals to establish a vibrant, distinctive print culture for the region.

Orr concludes her book generously, indicating the work that remains to be done in archival recovery, editorial republication, and scholarly analysis. Samuel Thomson offers a starting point to demonstrate the stylistic and thematic richness of the works of a large number of other writers who created distinctively Irish contributions to Romantic period literary, political, and religious history.

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