Andrew Radford, *Mary Butts and British Neo-Romanticism: The Enchantment of Place*. London: Bloomsbury, 2014. Pp. 244. £85.00. ISBN 9781441138613.

Although there has been a steady increase in scholarship on Mary Butts (1890-1937), especially since the publication of Patrick Wright's landmark chapter in *On Living in an Old Country* (1985), the Dorsetshire author remains something of a neglected figure, perhaps even 'the most obscure of major modern writers', as Andrew Radford suggests in this strikingly rich and erudite survey of her work (53). The reasons may lie, to some extent, in her tendency to defy classification: while undeniably modernist in style and technique – Radford notes, for example, Butts's 'lexical tactics of radical juxtaposition and the disruptive arrangement of narrative cadences or pastoral motifs' (177) – she is equally drawn towards Romanticism, particularly the mystical visuality of William Blake. This connection, evident in the allusive title of Butts's childhood memoir *The Crystal Cabinet* (1937), is unsurprising, given that she was the great-granddaughter of Blake's principal patron Thomas Butts. She thus finds herself caught between the experimental verve of modernism and the potent sense of spirituality and place that she discovers in both Blake and Wordsworth – the latter of whom she describes as 'the highest order of mystic' in an essay quoted by Radford (16).

As its title makes clear, this study aims to reconcile these two strands of Butts's writing by reading her as part of the 'intertwined historical and aesthetic experiences, practices and routines' that Raymond Mortimer designated as 'neo-romanticism' (vii). This approach has the advantage of emphasizing two central (and related) aspects of her work: its mystical identification with a 'universally vital and animated' rural landscape, and its powerful visual sense of this environment (5). Radford thus aligns her with neo-romantic artists such as Paul Nash and Kit Wood, arguing that these figures are engaged in a collective project to reappraise the 'interrelations between art and the fluctuating destines of "place"' (viii). This imaginative reengagement with the earthworks and chalk uplands of southern England in the interwar period, Radford suggests, is a central pillar of Butts's approach, which seeks to express the numinous, entrancing qualities of these sites through the medium of a 'recondite modernism' that posits 'the act of writing as a gateway to pantheistic, ecstatic, monistic or paranormal experience' (3). As a neo-romantic, Butts attempts to use the literary innovations of her era to generate new forms of engagement with the histories, mythologies, folklore and mystical power of the Dorset landscape.

This situation of Butts within the neo-romantic context occupies a lengthy opening chapter, before Radford goes on to summarize existing scholarship. Singled out for particular praise here is Jane Garrity, whose *Step-Daughters of England* (2003) disentangles the feminist qualities of novels like *Armed with Madness* (1928) from their reactionary elements, such as the 'eroticized sensuality of Butts's topographical images', which reinforce associations of the rural landscape with the passive female body (76). Radford's lucid lexical precision enables him to survey a significant swathe of criticism with nuance and concision, before proceeding through a series of chapters that analyse Butts's novels, memoir, journals and short stories. Although it was her final book, *The Crystal Cabinet* is analysed in the first of these chapters, enabling Radford to emphasize the Romantic and proto-environmentalist qualities that are most marked here: as he notes, certain passages align her with 'a tradition of environmental protest imbuing the civic-nationalist critiques of a polluted urban modernity' (112). His survey of Butts's work, here and in subsequent chapters, is also laudable for its focus upon several of the short stories, which have sometimes been neglected.

Mary Butts and British Neo-Romanticism offers sympathetic readings of Butts's fiction, but Radford does not evade the problematic political elements of her work, which go beyond the gender issues discussed by Garrity. As he notes, Wright's analysis of these

questions remains compelling: she emerges from *On Living in an Old Country*, he suggests, as a 'Janus-faced, deeply conflicted and embittered dissident who hovers on a cultural fault-line' (66). The tension between modernism and Romanticism that we find in her work is connected to a contradiction between the 'interrogative impulsion of her maverick heightening style' and her 'wistful thematics', which are drawn towards a reactionary essentialism (217). Butts's experimental style seems to lend itself to a progressive politics, insofar as it expresses queer, cosmopolitan and marginal qualities, yet the explicit rhetoric of the texts – particularly in works such as *Death of Felicity Taverner* (1932) – is often exclusionary, representing coastal Dorset as a world sealed off from urban interlopers, who are unable to correctly 'read' the landscape. Ultimately, Radford argues, this 'patrician nativism' should caution us against readings of neo-romanticism that seek to connect it harmoniously with the industrial and socio-cultural developments of modernity (218). His study thus successfully incorporates an emphasis upon the neo-romantic elements of Butts's work with a balanced and insightful assessment of its political implications.

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