

**Kenneth McNeil, *Scottish Romanticism and Collective Memory in the British Atlantic*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020. Pp. 384. £90. ISBN 978474455466.**

Notable among influential studies that opened the borders of Romanticism to the ‘Celtic world’ in the late nineties and early 2000s were Katie Trumpener’s *Bardic Nationalism* and Ian Duncan’s *Scott’s Shadow*. Trumpener’s 1997 book redrew the contours of ‘English’ literature through an examination of that literature’s deep indebtedness to the products of cultural (bardic) nationalism coming from the Celtic peripheries: Ireland, Scotland, and Wales. Duncan a decade later proposed a Scottish Romanticism centered in early nineteenth-century Edinburgh and continuous with the Scottish Enlightenment, especially with the sceptical empiricism of David Hume. Hume’s theory of *belief*, Duncan argued, posited a shared border between history and fiction that found its ‘fullest realization in Scott’s novelistic practice’ (127). The shared spaces of history and fiction, and the interconnections among Britain’s Celtic peripheries: both formulations are central to Kenneth McNeil’s expansive and fascinating book, which builds upon the studies of Trumpener, Duncan, and others as he proposes to situate Scottish Romanticism geographically in the broader British Atlantic and epistemologically among sites of collective memory.

In this latter connection, McNeill cites Maurice Halbwachs’s 1925 *The Collective Memory*, where Halbwachs sets collective memory against history understood as overarching and unitary. While historians, in Halbwachs’s view, understand that ‘there is only one history,’ collective memory is a local phenomenon whose ‘chief function is to provide a sense of cohesive group identity [...]’: “when it considers its past the group feels strongly it has remained the same and becomes conscious of its identity over time” (quoted in McNeill (10)). The longing of the group to feel ‘strongly it has remained the same,’ the need to hold on to ‘rituals and repeated acts located in the ephemerality of day-to-day experience [...] [and] passed down from one generation to another’ (2) are particularly felt, McNeill suggests, by Scottish writers in the early nineteenth century: a point in time when the failure of the Jacobite rebellion is still in living memory of a diminishing few even as the period since 1745 in Scotland has been one of unparalleled transformation and modernization. As Scots in the early nineteenth century recollect the Highland Clearances, emigration to North America, interactions with indigenous Native Americans, involvement in or opposition to the slave trade, they do so, McNeill argues, steeped not only in a universalizing Scottish Enlightenment Philosophy of Man, but against the backdrop of a Highland-Lowland divide which leads to ‘self-awareness that “Scottishness” partook of both the primitive and the civilised’ (8).

While the above limns the theoretical approaches that McNeill develops in an introductory chapter that is at once capacious and focused, space does not allow me to summarize fully how he deploys this multivalent approach in each of five body chapters. In Chapter 1, to take one example, McNeill identifies in Scott’s *Waverley Novels* a ‘particular mode of historical consciousness configured as a crisis of memory [...] in which the past has been ruptured from the present’ by a single historical event within living memory of a dwindling few, the Forty-Five (34). McNeill terms this mode of consciousness ‘aftermath’, and he traces its tropes of generational remembering and amnesia from Scott to the Scottish memoirs of Henry Cockburn (*Memorials of his Time*, 1856) and Robert Chambers (*Traditions of Edinburgh*, 1825), but also to North American fictions: Washington Irving’s ‘Rip van Winkle’ and John Neal’s *Seventy-Six*. In this chapter and others, the connections between ‘transperipheral’ – McNeil contrasts his term with a centre-periphery model – British Atlantic sites are more often direct than merely conceptual, as the relationship between

Scott and Irving was, for example, personal and, in McNeill's account, the literary influence mutual (54–55). Similarly direct connections among the transperipheries are taken up in chapters on: Anne Grant, whose *Letters from the Mountains* and *Memoirs of an American Lady*, both published in 1808, provide Grant's first-hand recollections of everyday life in, respectively, the Scottish Highlands and colonial America; the Earl of Selkirk's theorisation that Scottish emigration to North America, necessitated by the Clearances, provided a way for dispossessed Highlanders to preserve customs and traditions; and the contributions of Scots to discourses on transatlantic slavery, which, McNeill suggests, uniquely reflect their 'experiences of diasporic and expatriation migration and colonial occupation' (206). A closing chapter on John Galt argues that his emigrant novels *Lawrie Todd* and *Bogle Corbet* are best understood as exercises in decentred cultural memory, memorialising the circum-Atlantic world as a place of trauma 'without a historical centre or fixed point of reference' (275). Each chapter delves deeply into a topic fascinating in its own right and engages fluently and persuasively with recent scholarship on a remarkable range of primary materials before returning to the central claim that collective memory is, in its many forms, a defining feature of Scottish writing in the British Atlantic world in the early nineteenth century. In its scope and achievement, this study is an important contribution to our ongoing project of rethinking – indeed, opening – the borders of British Romanticism.

Gerald Egan  
California State University, Long Beach