

**Dafydd Moore, *Richard Polwhele and Romantic Culture: The Politics of Reaction and the Poetics of Place*. New York and London: Routledge, 2021. Pp. x + 206. £108. ISBN 9780367651572.**

Richard Polwhele's notorious poem, *The Unsex'd Females* (1798), is, Dafydd Moore affirms, 'an axiomatic point of reference for scholars interested in radical women' (1). Polwhele's polemic exemplifies the vitriol such women and their work provoked, but beyond this I knew little of his long career and varied writings. *Richard Polwhele and Romantic Culture* has changed that, and I am all the better for it. Not that Polwhele turns out to be much-maligned, or any more appealing than *The Unsex'd Females* suggests: 'while there is more to Polwhele than the anti-Jacobin misogynist of popular repute, he was an anti-Jacobin misogynist, and quite a lot of that "more" is equally unpalatable.' (2) Armed with this caveat, I finished the book with some respect and sympathy for Polwhele, if no closer to embracing his views.

Polwhele's politics, Moore argues, should be examined in their regional and social context, rather than simply labelled 'reactionary conservatism' (187). Born in Truro, Polwhele lived in the far south-west for most of his life. After Oxford and ordination, his clerical career took him first to Exeter and then to West Cornwall, offering insight into the pursuit of a literary career from one of the furthest extremities of the British mainland. Moore favours the 'archipelagic criticism' of recent decades that challenges conventional understandings of centre and periphery, but cautions that this reorientation of criticism can itself exclude: Polwhele is absent from Alan Kent's *The Literature of Cornwall* (2000), his 'politics and ecclesiology' as a 'Church and King man' not 'easily accommodated within' the 'radical dissenting and labouring class tradition' identified by Kent (12). Moore's key aims are to 'contribute to the ongoing effort to establish a genuinely archipelagic approach to the literary culture of the period' and to consider the 'range and complexity of loyalist literary activity and culture', countering 'the predominant interest in more radical or at least progressive perspectives' (2). Five chapters examine the social context of Polwhele's literary life in the south west, his conceptions of loyalism and heroism in poetry spanning his career, the meaning of place in his work, his involvement in the religious controversies of the day and, finally, his self-fashioning in letters and memoirs.

Chapter One concerns Polwhele's involvement in *Poems Chiefly by Gentlemen of Devonshire and Cornwall* (1792) and *Essays by a Society of Gentlemen at Exeter* (1795). Disagreements between contributors illuminate 'the tension between coterie publication and the world of professional print' (38), exposing the limits of collaboration and differing conceptions of intellectual property. In correspondence, Polwhele sees himself as a literary professional hardly used by amateurs. His 'disdain for the pretensions of the gentlemanly amateur and with it the identity of the social class whose political interests he otherwise defended' (49), troubles a simplistic assessment of his political affiliations.

Subsequent chapters explore this ambivalence further. Examining his poetry, from *The Fate of Lewellyn* (1777) to *The Fair Isobel* (1815), Chapter Two examines Polwhele's loss of confidence in the landowning classes' capacity to embody virtues of patriotism and heroism, at the same time as he was unable to 'contemplate a viable alternative' (80) to the decline of the Tory ideals he espoused. Polwhele's critique skewers the failings of social structures he wishes to thrive and to which, nevertheless, he remains attached. Discussing first Polwhele's long poem, *The Influence of Local Attachment* (1796/1798) and then his seven-volume *History of Cornwall* (1803-1808), Chapter Three finds further evidence that Polwhele's methods push his conventional treatment of inherited forms to a point at which 'they ultimately deny the very stability and indeed authority they seek' (113). The search for universal values founders on the dominance of the subjective and personal.

Chapter Four explores Polwhele's religious writings: hostility to both Methodism and the evangelical wing of the Church of England is exceeded only by frustration with 'those amongst the Establishment he identifies as sleep-walking into [...] the destruction of the Church of England and the social order' it supports (147). Writing from his own 'corner of Cornwall' in *Anecdotes of Methodism* (1800), Polwhele exploits his limited vantage point, which becomes 'the means by which the imagination can extrapolate local events on a national scale' (139), regardless of evidence.

The final chapter examines Polwhele's (auto)biographical writings, including his publication of letters (such as those he received from Scott) and volumes such as *Traditions and Recollections* (1826) and *Biographical Sketches of Cornwall* (1831). In the latter, Polwhele's approach of publishing subjects' letters with the minimum of editorial intervention replaces, Moore suggests, 'the tyranny of the great man and his biography' with 'a participatory co-creation of meaning' in which the reader can author a life from the letters: again the 'tension between the Tory Polwhele's ostensive cultural and indeed real politics and the ideological logic of his favoured literary methods' is evident (172).

Copy-editing slips frustrated this reader throughout the book. But they don't detract from the interest of this engaged and detailed study that argues persuasively for Polwhele's importance in a richer understanding of Romantic culture.

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