Matthew Leporati, *Romantic Epics and the Mission of Empire*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023. Pp. 250. £85. ISBN 9781009285155.

Romantic Epics and the Mission of Empire argues that a persistent strain of epic in Romanticism delineates a contemporary anxiety that empire was being refashioned into a 'benevolent project of spreading British culture and religion across the globe' (1). Central to that story is the rise of the missionary movement; in the 1790s evangelism became a key British export as missionaries spread across the globe. Yet, as Leporati shows, any notion that the missionary movement was 'the unambiguous partner of empire' (2) is a misleading one, and there were always tensions between the overlapping projects of missionaries and colonists. Missionaries were often highly critical of imperial practices; further, their work could sometimes stand to destabilize the hierarchical principles on which imperialism was built, for instance by highlighting 'points of correspondence between Christianity and supposedly savage Indigenous beliefs' (113). Epic's work in the period was to expose the antipathies between the missionaries and the imperialists, and, in so doing, reveal the shaky underpinnings of the notion of 'benevolent empire'.

Key to the book's argument is the idea that the epic was 'suspended between internal and external orientations' (36). Resisting the narrative that Romantic epics (exemplified by *The Prelude*) were expressions of a widespread tilt toward interiority, Leporati argues that they are better characterized by a desire to 'evangelize': to effect change in the external world by impressing or imposing one's internal experience upon it. This plays out variously. An ingenious reading of Ann Yearsley's *Brutus* sees her at once adopt the status of a 'convert' to epic classicism – redolent of her infamous conversion, under Hannah More, from labouring 'savage' to 'civilized' poet – even as the poem itself insists that converts owe nothing to their converters. Meanwhile, Southey, in *Madoc*, explores with ambivalence 'the troubling links between missions of liberation and missions of conquest' (134). He was determined that religion should not become merely 'a dogmatic tool of empire' (137), but ultimately upheld the belief that, if properly Christianized, a benevolent empire was attainable.

Madoc concerns itself with religious and cultural hybridity, and notions of cultural hybridity are pursued in a subsequent chapter on Olaudah Equiano. Though not an obvious candidate for a book on epic (or Romanticism), Equiano engages extensively with epic verse in his *Interesting Narrative*, and Leporati connects moments of poetic citation to a claim concerning the author's 'hybrid' identity as 'both missionary and convert' (175), during an episode where Equiano recounts his own efforts to spread the Christian faith. (There is no mention of Equiano's own poetry, though the 'Miscellaneous Verses' mark the moment of Equiano's own conversion, and notably take the form of rhymed hymn stanzas – a decidedly un-Miltonic, non-epic form.)

Other chapters deal variously with poetical works associated with the early missionary movement, the epic cultures of the politically charged 1790s, and, in the final two chapters, the high-canonical epics of Blake, Byron, and Wordsworth. Blake is singled out as a radical 'epoist', whose work presents a direct attack on the 'Christian imperial ideologies' sustained by other epics in the period (186), yet even Blake, in his picture of a unified 'Albion', figures as a species of imperial fantasist. Byron gets the last word of the book, as chief subverter of the Evangelist epic. Don Juan goes forth in the world but perceives humanity around him, rather than trying to impose it there; Byron himself is as sceptical towards conversion efforts as he is towards empire.

'Epic' is used elastically in the book, and that elasticity produces unexpected comparisons; *Don Juan*, for instance, 'might be grouped with the more explicitly subversive epic productions of writers like Blake, Equiano, and Joel Barlow' (226). Leporati calls a work 'epic' when it 'engages the epic tradition by employing tropes commonly associated with it'

(21), a definition expansive enough to cover, for instance, prose non-fiction. The unspoken assumption on which Leporati's interiority-exteriority thesis rests is that epic's ruling 'trope' resides in the action of an individual hero: Brutus, Madoc, Don Juan, Blake's Milton, Wordsworth's Wordsworth, and so on. This might be why, looking back to the earlier 1700s, Leporati speaks of 'a dearth of epic poems written in the eighteenth century' (26), but it is strange to discount, for instance, the entire traditions of the Neoclassical georgic or the mock-epic, especially given the otherwise permissive use of 'epic' in the book.

The book's use of the term, however, does usefully circumscribe a previously under-valued Romantic concern with conversion and imperialism, where 'epic' is the site of a theorization of both attachments and animosities between the two. The book thinks past the narrative wherein epic gave way to Romantic lyric, and it also resists easy characterisations of Romantic epic, as subject-centric, or as 'tend[ing] towards fragmentation' (260). Instead, the Romantic epic is a hybrid form: backwards-looking but future-oriented, critical of empire but by turns hopeful for a unified world, sceptical of religious doctrine but seeking to re-enchant the universe. At its centre is the fraught question of benevolent empire – of goodness imposed – which vexed many a Romantic epic writer. This is a book of significant value, therefore, to those with interests in poetic form and form's history, but also to scholars with far wider interests in empire, conversion, religion, and secularity, and the role of the literary imagination in working through those concepts and their relations.

Chris Townsend
University of St Andrews