

**Mary-Ann Constantine, *Curious Travellers: Writing the Welsh Tour, 1760-1820*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024. Pp. 336. £103.00. ISBN 9780198852124.**

This study of travel-writing of (and from) Wales takes its title from the ‘Curious Travellers’ project (2014-18), which explored the Welsh and Scottish tour in the eighteenth century. This volume explores the Welsh tours, and can be viewed as a companion volume to Leask *et al.*, *Old Ways and New Roads: Travels in Scotland 1720-1832* (2022). The title of both book and project springs from Pennant’s own wish to be ‘considered not as a Topographer, but as a curious traveller willing to collect all that a traveller may be supposed to do in his voyage’ (xviii), and this book succeeds in collecting an astounding range of such curiosities. Taking a very broad view of what constitutes ‘travel writing’, its first chapter surveys views of Wales from the twelfth to the beginning of the eighteenth century, beginning with the *ur-text* of Welsh tours, Gerald of Wales’s *Itinerarium Cambriae*. The ‘intensely intertextual’ (24) nature of travel writing is foregrounded as each of these early modern tours is encountered, incorporated and refracted by successive writers in turn—Leland, Camden, Lhuyd—culminating in Pennant and, inspired by him, the Romantic-era travels which make up the bulk of this book.

This long historical view is well counterbalanced by the depth and variety of the eighteenth-century tours that Constantine chooses. Pennant’s *Tours in Wales* (1778-83) loom large, their influence on other tours present at almost every step, but they never overshadow the less-famous or unpublished tours discussed here. These range from the spiritual travel journals of itinerant preachers such as Edmund Jones, Howel Harries, and Charles and John Wesley, to scientist Michael Faraday’s oddly touching encounter with a ‘Welch damsel’ and a waterfall. Two labouring-class poets, Edward Williams—known by his ‘bardic’ pseudonym Iolo Morganwg—and Robert Bloomfield show that it wasn’t merely the well-off who followed the routes into Wales, ticking off views suggested by influencers such as Gilpin. Williams’s notebooks are a particularly interesting counterpoint to the generality of tours, being not only himself Welsh but travelling *back from* London and writing (for his own eyes) accounts of the English in similarly irreverent or dismissive tones as English tourists in Wales; Oxford dons and Black Country rustics both feel the sharp edge of his tongue, giving an interesting insight into the complexity of Williams’s class consciousness. Women tourists are represented by Catherine Hutton and Mary Morgan. The latter’s encounter with industrial south Wales provides a personal and human view of a landscape often used merely as a foil to throw sublime ‘wild’ landscapes into relief. Although her language is now jarringly primitivist (‘The miners sit upon their hams, as the Indians do’, she observes [123]), her encounter with the fossil fuel extraction which drove British industry and empire shows us the other side of the mountain sublime.

Constantine engages the texts with eco- and post-colonial criticism, inextricably entangled in the Welsh context when the extraction of slate, coal, and copper not only had consequences on the other side of the world, but also human and environmental ramifications in Wales which persist in places to this day. Tour writers’ encounters with an unstable landscape echo down the years; Morgan notes that worked-out coal pits ‘suffered to be overgrown with weeds and brambles’ have caused ‘several very fatal accidents’ (128). I write this mere days after Storm Bert brought down another unstable coal tip onto the community of Cwmtillery in Blaenau Gwent; comparisons with the Aberfan tragedy of 1966 have been unavoidable. At Parys mountain on Anglesey, the nearby copper works which brought growth to the area also result in ecocide, as viewed by Richard Ayton and William Daniell in 1813:

The total destruction of all vegetation on the land bordering the sea has been occasioned by the smoke from the furnaces, and the fumes from some immense

kilns, in which copper ore was formerly roasted. The latter are now reduced to a heap of rubbish, and the blackened bricks and stones look like the ruins of a tremendous fire, and add not a little to the horrors of the place (261).

Welsh aspects of the Romantic ‘internal tour’ have been often overlooked in favour of the more famous Hibernian travels. Constantine’s work shows how unfair this neglect has been, and the huge range of texts these encounters produced. Such an idiosyncratic genre is treated here both as literature and history, ‘a literature *of* transition, claiming a special status as witness and describer’ (7). Mary-Ann Constantine’s exploration, weaving together the many strands of such disparate accounts, produces a fascinating volume in which the reader themselves becomes a curious traveller through these ex-centric, and often eccentric, tours.

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