

John Barrell, *Edward Pugh of Ruthin, 1763-1813: 'A Native Artist'*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013. Pp. 245. 59 colour illustrations, 74 black and white. £65 hb, £25 pb. ISBN 9780708325667 (hb); 9780708325674 (pb).

John Barrell's publications will be well known to all students of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century British cultural and political history. In this book, he returns to his early interest in the politics of landscape, as revealed in his influential studies of John Clare (*The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place, 1730-1840* (1972)) and George Morland (*The Dark Side of the Landscape* (1980)). At first sight, Edward Pugh, the Welsh artist and writer, is an unpromising subject for a book of this length and lavishness. With its 133 illustrations, it is longer and more copiously illustrated than many books on major artists. Pugh's artistic production is not impressive by the standards of conventional art history: a few undistinguished portraits and a large number of grisaille landscape drawings which were aquatinted and issued as prints, and as illustrations to the text of his 150,000-word travel book, *Cambria Depicta*, published posthumously in 1816. Barrell himself admits that he cannot get very excited about the illustrations to *Cambria Depicta*. But the 'brilliant' text of that book is a different matter, and so too is the set of Six Views of Denbighshire that Pugh issued in 1794. In addition, Pugh produced some lively views of London crowds for a further publication, *Modern London* (1804). These three achievements provide the basic structure for a book that is both engagingly written and meticulously researched.

The book begins and ends like a detective story, conveying a sense of the thrills of research. It starts with the purchase of an anonymous watercolour and finishes with the resurfacing of the one view by Pugh that Barrell would have wanted to find – a panorama of Pugh's beloved Vale of Clwyd. This work, though technically accomplished, turns out, poignantly, to be a disappointment as Barrell concludes that Pugh, towards the end of his life, represents his native land as a landscape, not as a place – something to be viewed with aesthetic detachment rather than known and understood.

For most of his career, however, Pugh, like Clare, is depicting and describing places that he knew well, and using strategies and details which convey that knowledge. The other artists and writers who traversed north Wales in this period were predominantly English, unable even to understand the language (and unashamed of their ignorance in this respect). Pugh, as Barrell rightly argues, offers an authentically Welsh perspective. He could speak Welsh, and the text of *Cambria Depicta* shows that he spent time talking to the local inhabitants, rich and poor, and appreciating their many acts of kindness to him. His Six Views of 1794 also provide insights into the state of Denbighshire in the early years of the war with revolutionary France. With one exception (an estate portrait, a genre on which, surprisingly, Barrell can find little to say) they provide springboards for fascinating and wide-ranging analyses of, for example, the patterns of land ownership and exploitation, the effects of enclosure and the erosion of customary rights, and the reactions to the war. Some of his readings of the images are questionable: the figure interpreted as a tragic 'war widow' in *Llanfwrog, Ruthin and Llanbedr* is quite unlike the frantic, starving women depicted in other prints and written accounts, and is not even wearing black (she is described as 'nearly black'). Similarly, the 'industrious miner' in *Bathafarn Hills, from Coedmarchan Rocks* looks like a stock figure admiring the view, and his 'pile of spoil' might be either a small hill or an attempt to represent shadow. But the discussions that proceed from these interpretations are highly illuminating, and well supported by material from local newspapers and enclosure maps.

Barrell is at his best when he can trace the occupations, social class and activities of figures in the landscape, and the marks they leave on it in the shape of such items as cottages and churches, lime kilns and boundary stones. This interest in people is also evident in his

perceptive descriptions of the tumbling children in Pugh's views of London. Barrell is animated, too, by a sense of the disservice done by the predominantly metropolitan bias of art history and the consequent neglect of figures like Pugh. His book demonstrates the importance of prints and book illustrations in spreading a taste for landscape, and provides a model for the kinds of analysis that can be applied to them. Above all, he creates an affectionate and convincing portrait of the artist, walking indefatigably around north Wales with his faithful dog, Miss Wowski, at his heels. This book will, surely, achieve its stated aim of restoring Pugh to his rightful place in the cultural history of Wales, both as a writer and as an artist.

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