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BOOK REVIEWS



Alex Bechamol, *Intellectual Politics and Cultural Conflict in the Romantic Period: Scottish Whigs, English Radicals and the Making of the British Public Sphere* (Aldershot and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010), x + 236pp. ISBN 978-0-7546-6446-8; £55 (hb).

Richard J. Hill, *Picturing Scotland through the Waverley Novels: Walter Scott and the Origins of the Victorian Illustrated Novel* (Aldershot and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010), xii + 224pp. ISBN 978-0-7546-6806-0; £55 (hb).

THESE TWO BOOKS engage with the literary and intellectual culture of early nineteenth century Britain from very different perspectives. What unites them is their analysis of print culture as a means of understanding the ideological landscape of England and Scotland in the period. This allows both studies to rise above the narrow boundaries of intellectual history on the one hand and literary scholarship on the other, resulting in explorations of early nineteenth-century worldviews which step beyond the conventional confines of academic disciplinarily. As discussed below, however, the inherent disparity between their approaches to 'romanticism', when juxtaposed against one another, also raises questions about the ongoing use of that term as a critical concept.

In *Intellectual Politics and Cultural Conflict in the Romantic Period*, Alex Bechamol undertakes a comparative study of political thought in Scotland and England during the early 1800s. He contends that Scotland's public sphere was Whiggish, bourgeois, moderate and allied to the state. He then investigates the contrasting tradition of English radicalism which, he asserts, was Plebeian, anti-establishment and sometimes even revolutionary. The main contention of the book is that the interplay between these opposing philosophies was an important factor in shaping the British political context during the first three decades of the nineteenth century. Whilst Bechamol discusses well-known events such as the Peterloo Massacre of 1819 and the 1832 Reform Act, these serve as little more than the historical landmarks with which he locates his analysis. This is no traditional political history, but rather an in-depth investigation into the development of and interactions between two schools of thought that had distinctly separate roots and fundamentally opposed philosophies.

Perhaps unavoidably, therefore, this is a work which is steeped in cultural theory. It relies heavily on the writings of a diverse range of historical, literary and sociological scholars, including Ian Duncan, Jurgen Habermas, Kevin Gilmartin, Christopher Hill, Iain MacCalman, Nicholas Philipson, Richard Sher, E. P. Thompson, Raymond Williams, and Kathleen Wilson (to name but a few). Throughout his own research, Bechamol gets a great deal of mileage from

the ideas of these academic grandees, building on their influential discussions about the British public sphere, literary Romanticism, cultural materialism class consciousness and the analysis of political thought. Indeed, the first half of the book, in which he traces the development of Whig and radical intellectual traditions from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, is greatly reliant on the work of others. There is barely a primary source in sight and Bechimol's approach is certainly not for those who lack the taste or tenacity for extended conceptual discussions of theoretical complexities. Nevertheless, these early chapters succeed in making a convincing case for one of Bechimol's main points; namely that the significance of English radicalism has been under-estimated by recent scholars who tend to see the British public sphere exclusively in terms of a bourgeois Whig ascendancy with its roots in the civil society of eighteenth century Scotland.

It is not until page 99 that we get to the meat of Bechimol's study, in the form of two chapters focusing on political thought in the Scottish and English public spheres respectively during the early nineteenth century. This is what the book is really about; the earlier chapters tracing the development of these rival traditions are certainly necessary, yet they are also essentially preliminary and preparatory. Here, the reader is treated to detailed analyses of the writings of Francis Jeffrey, Henry Brougham and Thomas Carlyle in the *Edinburgh Review*, and Thomas Spence, Thomas Wooler and William Cobbett in the *Black Dwarf* and the *Political Register*. It is through this comparison of intellectual output, circulated to wide readerships via the burgeoning periodical culture of the age, that Bechimol makes his case. These sections juxtapose an Enlightenment philosophical inheritance in Scotland which emphasised the intellectual and moral leadership of the middle classes, against a popular English radicalism which condemned Britain's elitist commercial society and increasingly advocated a utopian vision of agrarianism from days gone by. The book skilfully demonstrates how these rival responses to the socio-economic shifts of the period interacted with and took impetus from one another. This culminated on the one hand in triumph for Scottish Whiggism through the 1832 Reform Act, and on the other in the oppression of English radicalism as exemplified by Peterloo and the Six Acts that followed.

Bechimol's grasp and application of scholarship from a diversity of disciplines is striking, as is the detail and insight with which he unpacks the complex ideologies at play in the period. However, his reliance on secondary works does at some points make his analysis seem curiously ahistorical. With only a few exceptions, his use of primary sources is limited to the writings of the six intellectuals listed above. This lack of a direct and sustained engagement with sources representing the wider context means that there is little sense of the period itself. For example, whilst the focus on the *Edinburgh Review* as the primary organ of Scottish political thought is certainly sound, that periodical had influential Tory rivals in the form of the *Quarterly Review* and *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*. Clearly the intellectual Whiggism of Jeffrey *et al* was

far from unchallenged within the Scottish public sphere, yet both of these competing publications are conspicuous only by their absence. In the same vein, Bechimol cites the twin trends of industrialisation and urbanisation as key factors which shaped both of the discourses under investigation. However, there is relatively little discussion of the material impact of those changes on the bourgeois or Plebeian readerships at whom the articles of Jeffrey or Cobbett, for example, were aimed.

Yet these are relatively minor quibbles and should not detract from Bechimol's achievement. He has successfully corralled an impressive range of theoretical approaches and thus provided a sound foundation for the extended textual analysis at the heart of his book. This is an erudite and persuasive study which, whilst it may prove heavy going for students, will be invaluable to academics interested in political thought and its modes of transmission during the early part of the nineteenth century.

Richard Hill's book *Picturing Scotland Through the Waverley Novels* is perhaps less ambitious than Bechimol's work, yet makes some equally important points about intellectual and bourgeois culture in the early 1800s. This work engages with print culture through visual representations of romantic fiction, rather than the transmission of political and philosophical ideology via periodicals. Nonetheless, it shares with Bechimol's study an admirable willingness to combine historical and literary modes of analysis in order to further its case.

Firstly, Hill seeks to debunk the common misconception that Scott, like many leading romantic figures, had a marked distaste for book illustration. As conventional academic wisdom has it, Scott believed that illustration undermined the need for readers to use their imaginations when reading prose or poetry, whilst at the same time cheapening the unique originality of art through mass reproduction. The further assumption is that he only reluctantly allowed images to be associated with his *Waverley* novels out of commercial necessity, especially after his bankruptcy in 1813. In fact, as Hill demonstrates, Scott took a real interest in illustration. Much of his work was inspired by paintings and sketches, which he used to fire his imagination when writing. Indeed, Hill notes that Scott frequently painted tableaux with words and was in that sense an extremely visual writer. Moreover, whilst he had very little control over the illustrated editions of his novels printed in London, Scott was heavily involved in those produced by his Edinburgh publishers. In this way, Hill argues that the Edinburgh editions of the *Waverley* novels which were published within Scott's lifetime provided an important yet little-known foundation for the more celebrated author-led illustrated novels of the Victorian era.

Hill's work is built upon extensive research into correspondence between Scott, his Edinburgh publishers, and several artists whom he held in high regard. These letters show that he viewed illustrations as a corollary to text, believing that images could mean little without explanatory prose. However, they also show that from as early as 1805, Scott and his publisher John Constable were actively considering ways in which to incorporate drawings by the artists such


as James Skene, William Allan and Andrew Nasmyth into the *Waverley* novels. Scott was keen to exert personal control over this process, which meant not only choosing suitable artists and engravers but also accepting or rejecting sketches and engravings. Hill ably demonstrates that, for Scott, these images were not only intended as aids to the reader's imagination but also accurate ethnographic representations of the places and times that they depicted. It was not, therefore, that Scott disdained illustration, but rather that he insisted upon images which he believed were historically accurate and which captured a distinctly Scottish sense of place. In this we see his antiquarianism surfacing through the insistence that the specificity of the past be evoked not just in his writings but in the illustrations that accompanied them.

Hill's study highlights how Scott was aided in this by Constable. However, whilst illustrated supplements to the *Waverley* novels were produced by Constable, the goal of a fully illustrated edition was realised only after Constable's death by Scott's second Edinburgh publisher Robert Cadell. Hill makes some intriguing links between Cadell's *Magnum Opus* edition of 1829 and the existing popularity of annuals and gift books. By aping this type of physical presentation and taking advantage of new steel plate engraving techniques, Cadell succeeded in producing illustrated versions of Scott's novels in a cheap yet handsome format which appealed to a growing literary audience amongst the lower middle classes. Yet the most absorbing aspect of Hill's work is his discussion of two specific visual sources. The first is Allan's painting of 'The Murder of Archbishop Sharpe' by the covenanters, an event that sets in motion the plot of *Old Mortality*. As Hill points out, Scott saw the murder not as the work of national martyrs but rather as a distasteful act of religious extremism. Allan's painting reflected this view by depicting the event as a grubby assassination rather than a grand political gesture. Hill also uses this painting to show that it was Allan's concern for antiquarian accuracy of detail and costume that so impressed Scott, in contrast to the artistic licence which the author deplored in the illustrated London editions of his books. The other case study focuses on Andrew Nasmyth's drawings of the Edinburgh Tolbooth, a building that plays a central role in *The Heart of Midlothian*. This section does an excellent job of analysing a specific series of book illustrations and combining that with a discussion of the extensive architectural changes that Edinburgh was undergoing in the period. Hill uses this to tease out the juxtapositions between romantic nostalgia and a Whiggish sense of progress that were a hallmark of Scott's novels. He also highlights some fascinating links with Nasmyth's work as a set designer for dramatic adaptations of Scott's novels, and in so doing shows how illustrations could provide the reader with a sense of place and time in which Scott's plots could play out.

Hill presents the reader with a skilful investigation into Scott's relationship with both the concept and mechanics of book illustration, and offers a successful riposte to current assumptions on the subject. Moreover, he uses this research as a platform from which to analyse Scott's desire to inject a sense of Scottish

historical identity into the powerfully homogenising Anglo-centred Britishness of the early 1800s. Whilst Hill does have a tendency to repeat and re-justify points already well-made in earlier sections, this does not detract from the force of his argument. His study is based upon a close engagement with historical sources in the form of Scott's correspondence, literary material in the shape of the author's published writings, and of course the book illustrations themselves. The work is further supported by an extensive catalogue listing images from the illustrated supplements and editions of the *Waverley* novels published during Scott's lifetimes. Indeed, it is a shame that this catalogue, an impressive work of scholarship in its own right, is not utilised more to support key points and contentions in the main text of the book.

Bechimol and Hill take distinct and dissimilar approaches to very different topics, yet in both instances are rewarded with success. As already alluded to, however, the utilisation of the term 'romantic' as a means by which both scholars define the remit of their work highlights a wider problem. Bechimol makes frequent use of the phrase 'romantic period' in his investigation (it even appears in the book's title), yet there is no concerted attempt to pin down exactly what was 'romantic' about the print cultures and public spheres that are the subject of his research. Hill, meanwhile, uses the word 'romantic' less frequently yet focuses on topics that sit more recognisably within the traditional canon of romanticism. This is no criticism of either author, but is rather symptomatic of a broader tendency in recent scholarship to use 'romantic' as a general description of British culture in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. By juxtaposing the works of Bechimol and Hill, as this review has done, it might be suggested that the term is suffering from 'concept drift'. If both book illustration and political thought can be validly placed within the oeuvre of romanticism, then this perhaps implies that the term has become somewhat over-stretched. Indeed, it could be argued that it has lost much of its precision as a critical concept and is in danger of becoming a generic period label.

In any case, this is an issue of discipline-wide significance and is not intended as a reproach to either of the works under review. Regardless of the value or otherwise of Romanticism as a means of defining specific aspects of culture, it is clear that both Bechimol and Hill have taken innovative approaches to neglected subjects and succeeded in adding to our understanding of the outlooks and life-worlds that characterised key segments of British society in the early decades of the 1800s. 

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