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The Romantics and the British Landscape
(The British Library, 2006)
by Stephen Hebron

INTENDED for the general reader, Stephen Hebron's book sketches the broad and varied terrain of the Romantics' affinity with particular landscapes and their legacy for our cultural heritage. A map of Britain on the opening page locates those landscapes and connects them to Romantic poetry and lives: the Quantocks (Wordsworth and Coleridge, 1797–98), the Wye Valley (Wordsworth, 1798), Helpston (Clare, 1793–1828), Scotland (Coleridge, 1803; Keats, 1818), and, above all, the Lake District, home not only of Wordsworth (1799–1850) and Coleridge (1800–1804), but destination of their visiting admirers and friends, and location of a booming tourist industry by 1800. In five long chapters, Hebron tells the stories of the Romantics' attachment to and "highly subjective" (vii) appropriation of these five regional landscapes in Britain, embedding them in the context of the aesthetics and cultural practice of the picturesque with its concomitant growth of tourism in Britain, particularly Wales, the Lake District, and Scotland. Not only did Gilpin, chief theorist of the picturesque, map out a suggested itinerary of the Wye Valley in his *Observations*, Hebron explains, but he spelt out the aesthetic rules of the picturesque, inviting the tourist to become not only an observer, but also "a critic of scenery" (7).

Hebron depicts his four Romantic protagonists as highly conscious of the tradition of the picturesque, with Cowper's *The Seasons* as a second major point of textual reference. However, the Romantics' approach was "different", seeking not "the external forms of nature" but "the internal effects they had upon the mind" (vii). Persuasively, Hebron discusses Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" as a key text transcending the picturesque. If he sees Wordsworth's response to this tourist site as displaying a paradigmatic inward turn of loco-descriptive poetry, this is as apt as it is hardly original; yet he enriches his reading by sketching out contextual details—the early eighteenth-century antiquaries; the picturesque vogue for Tintern Abbey; the pleasure boats for tourists on the river; the scarcity of pastime walkers; the disturbing presence of industrialization—that freshly illuminate the individuality of Wordsworth's "completely original" poem, engaging with "thoughts and feeling, not the outward forms of the scenery" (14).

Next to Wordsworth, it is Clare who is shown to be most firmly engaged with and rooted in his native landscape. Hebron traces his life as that of a man "increasingly dislocated between the two worlds of John Clare the peasant, and John Clare the celebrated poet" (127), subject to the pressures of a patron who would not have enclosures lamented, and finally ending, after a decline in popularity, in depression. Coleridge and Keats make less persuasive readings

in Romantic appropriations of landscape. At times, the precise nature of the connection between individual Romantic poets and landscape appears to move a little out of focus, leaving Hebron's narrative to trace the biographical lines into other regions. Thus, if Keats had undertaken his tour North as a "prologue" (59) to his writing, in the hope that it would give him a greater capacity for hardship, enlarge his vision, and, most importantly, strengthen his reach in poetry" (88), Hebron shows him returning to milder, tamer, more urban topographical scenes: Hampstead Heath, the Isle of Wight, and Winchester, which finally provided Keats with his "ideal view" (91). Ultimately, the impact of the Scottish landscape, perhaps any landscape, on Keats appears not of crucial significance. And in the case of Coleridge, although walking "stimulated and enriched his extraordinary imagination" (41), the highest point of his "deeply felt engagement" with the topography of the Lake District and Scotland was soon past, leaving a sick and opium-addicted Coleridge lacking "the necessary joy to respond to its beauty" (48). Thus, the eventual loss, or lack, of landscape in the later life of Coleridge (and well as in the life of Keats) is in itself significant as it tells a different, 'un-Wordsworthian' story of the "hard reality and isolation of rural retirement" (45), of its incompatibility with political radicalism, which Thelwall was so conscious of, and of the ultimately limited power of landscape in terms of identity-making, of inspiring the imagination, or of healing.

Hebron's book offers a lively and very readable overview, albeit one oblivious to the gender issues involved (in Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey", for instance). Specialists in literary and cultural Romanticism will find in the stories of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, and Clare largely what one could expect, and with perhaps too much of a focus on the four big names, while minor figures crop up mainly as visitors. There are notable absences: de Quincey is mentioned only in passing, yet his obsession with Wordsworth and the Lake Poets, and his appropriation of 'their' landscape for his own self-fashioning would have added a significant facet of the intertextuality of landscape perception—and made entertaining reading, too. The sublime is suspiciously absent as an aesthetic category of transgression, although certainly evoked by Coleridge (in the Kantian sense)¹ when revelling in the challenges of the mountainous terrain of the Lake District. But then there are always things one could have included.

This is a fine book on the Romantics' engagement with landscape, catering for the non-specialist reader, and its high point is perhaps to be found in the final chapter on Wordsworth's *Guide to the Lakes*. Hebron sketches Wordsworth's notorious rejection of the railway line into the Lake District against the backdrop of his scarcely credible self-fashioning as 'living in isolation', while at the same time placing him at the starting point of an

¹ Cf. Kiene Brillenberg Wurth. "How the Dwarf Became the Giant. S. T. Coleridge's Kantian Appropriation of Sublime Nature in the Lake District." *Green and Pleasant Land. English Culture and the Romantic Countryside*. Ed. Amanda Gilroy. Groningen: Peeters, 2004. 19–30.

environmentalist tradition, working to preserve the Lake District for the public. The direct historical line Hebron thus traces is one from Clare's and, above all, Wordsworth's engagement with their native landscapes to a modern concern with ecology as well as to a modern cultural practice of heritage. If Wordsworth ultimately led to conservation and the National Trust, Stephen Hebron, who for many years was the Wordsworth Trust's Exhibitions and Publications Officer,² is indeed the ideal author of this book.

² Cf. Dove Cottage on its forthcoming exhibition "Romantic Poets, Romantic Places" prepared by Hebron <<http://www.wordsworth.org.uk/events/index.asp?pageid=474>> [accessed 1 Oct. 2009].