

Book Review of *An Oxford Companion to the Romantic Age: British Culture 1776-1832*, Iain McCalman, Ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, pp. xiii + 780; illustrations; index. ISBN 0-19-924543-6

By H. George Hahn

Since the great age of encyclopedias in the eighteenth century, compendia of knowledge have been a large part of the working capital of general inquiry and scholarship alike. Whether orienting the non-specialist or offering summary knowledge of adjacent fields for the scholar, the form's final test is the inclusiveness of its coverage and knowledge of its contributors. *McCalman's Oxford Companion to the Romantic Age: British Culture 1776-1832* passes both tests exceedingly well.

The *Oxford Companion* divides into two parts. Forty-two essays of 5,000 words each followed by select bibliographies compose Part One. These essays center on a historical introduction to revolution, war, democracy, women, empire, slavery, policing, law, utopianism, religion, sensibility, poverty, domesticity, industrialization, class, land, education, medicine, consumerism, viewing (art exhibits), publishing, prints, popular culture, theater, design, music, painting, architecture, poetry, prose, novels, enlightenment, political economy, natural philosophy, antiquarianism, exploration, history, psychology, language, and literary theory. If a theme informs most of the essays, it is transformation. And it is that theme which then gives the triple task to each author to show what was transformed, how and why it was changed, and into what it became.

Jerome McGann's essay "Poetry" illustrates how the more circumscribed topics allow essayists to complete these tasks. In focusing on the poetic treatment of nature, McGann uses the principal transformer, Wordsworth, as he reacts against the "outrageous stimulation" and extravagance in contemporary poetry. His reaction is to conceive a rural myth aiming to transform its readership spiritually and emotionally. And Wordsworth's myth was then to generate very different ways of rendering nature by Blake, Coleridge, Byron, Shelly, and Keats. The cause and effects of transformation become clearly delineated.

But other subjects dictate such a wide historical sweep that the essayists are at pains to account for causes and effects. J. E. Cookson's essay "War," for example, links the subject to economic and social issues, classifies different types of land forces, and offers the useful phrase of "defense patriotism" that distinguishes popular support for the war effort from that of the gentry. But with such a wide time frame to cover, there is no mention of Napoleon's nine invasion attempts on Britain, of the Peninsular War, or of the great naval victories that let Britannia rule the waves. In this scheme, Adam Smith and English crowds become more important to war than Nelson and Wellington, and the transformation from nation to empire by war loses definition.

Part Two harbors the alphabetical entries. Its inclusivity is remarkable. Mainly biographical, there are entries on emperors and sopranos, astronomers and economists, poets and peasants, physicians and antiquarians, and many more. There are topical entries on duelling and debating clubs, population and pornography, madhouses and masquerades, fortune-telling and freedom of the press, slave narratives and the Silver Fork novel, taverns and treason trials, Waterloo and watercolor. The variety alone shows the varied and dynamic spirit of the times. And as in Part One, most of these shorter entries center on transformations.

Omissions? Of course. Large attempts will have small flaws. We find an entry for Barrington the pickpocket but none for Jenner, the smallpox vaccination inventor; for peasant poets and the poetry of Della Cruscanism but not Lake Poets, Satanic Poets, or Cockney Poets; for Ireland but not England, Scotland, and Wales; for Anglicanism, Jews, Methodism, Quakers, and Unitarianism but not for Catholics. Although some such waifs and strays find a home in essays or other entries, they have none of their own. Most oddly, however, for a volume on a nation and age at war, no entries appear for the army, navy, home defense, uniforms, weapons, and warships, though military bands do get an entry.

Competition? *Hanoverian Britain, 1714-1837: An Encyclopedia* (Garland, 1997) is this book's chief rival, but square play bars this reviewer, a contributor to the Garland book, from judging between the two. Regardless, every essay and entry in *An Oxford Companion to the Romantic Age* repays reading. It is a volume that deserves a place on the reference shelf of every academic library, and its paperback price should make it a requirement for every graduate student who wants to become a naturalized citizen of Britain in the Romantic period.