

Jack Lynch (ed.). **The Oxford Handbook of British Poetry, 1660-1800.**

Pp. xxii + 794. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. £95.

There is a lot going on in Restoration and eighteenth-century poetry studies at present and now feels like a good time to have a major essay collection to celebrate it. Historically-minded formalist work is challenging the way we think about the use of poetic tropes and devices at particular points in history by particular people. The materialist turn in (especially) bibliographical studies has encouraged attention to the lives of eighteenth-century books as objects and the odd contingent forces that come together to make a printed poem look the way it does. New work in eco-criticism, genre studies, the history of science and the history of institutions is busy shaping the approaches we take to Restoration and eighteenth-century writing and the contexts we place it in. Poets (particularly female ones) who over the last two hundred years have been mentioned only in passing, or in scorn, are being revisited to challenge the small canon of writers and their works enshrined by twentieth-century criticism. Editorial work is flourishing, both in the production of landmark new editions of 'major' poets and in more experimental projects devoted to the recuperation of miscellanies and manuscript collections.

Jack Lynch's *Handbook* is a timely publication because it takes account of all of this and shows its value. Aiming 'not to repeat conventional wisdom, but to survey the current trends in scholarship' and 'set a research agenda' (p. xx), it ranges in forty-three essays from the Grub Street printer's shop to the suburban amateur poets' club to the desk of the Poet Laureate, reminding us continually that in the long eighteenth century spheres of literary activity like these hung together much more closely than we might think. The way the book is organised is designed to eschew both traditional 'big name' author-centric criticism and the commonplace labels ('Augustan satire'; 'poetry of sentiment'; 'pre-Romantic poetry') that attach – often

rather unhelpfully – to the period’s verse and its preoccupations. Instead, in seven parts it covers, firstly, the external contexts in which poetry was made and disseminated and in which contemporary readers might have expected to find it; and, secondly, the internal contexts and intratextual relations of particular poems and groups of poems. Part I focusses on the unexpected places you might have come across poetry in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, from the cramped pages of monthly magazines to the echoing spaces of lecture halls. Parts II and III remind us of the extraordinary catholicity of backgrounds and interests poets had during the period, and the unpredictability (to a modern reader at least) of the things they chose to write about – ‘Newtonian optics and tariffs’, as Lynch writes, ‘dildos and the reproductive processes of flowering plants (p. xx). Parts IV-VI zero in on poetic practice – covering important poetic genres, verse forms and characteristic local devices such as allusion and irony – while Part VII turns outwards again to look at the vibrant industries of reviewing, scholarship and honours conferral that spun out from poetry-writing in the period.

Certain critical preoccupations are evident across a number of chapters. There is a discernible interest in pointing out the curious ‘peripheral’ activities of poets whom we have come to think of as culturally central during the period, and an answering drive to bring poets who have been traditionally overshadowed or dismissed into the limelight. Some of Wordsworth and Coleridge’s earliest publications, Jennifer Batt points out in her chapter on ‘Poems in Magazines’, appeared not in expensively produced books in London but squashed into the pages of the West Country local *Weekly Entertainer*. The Warton brothers, Thomas and Joseph, as Nick Groom reminds us in ‘The Poet as Fraud’, may have had high-minded ideas about the place of the poet in society, but they also ‘edited’ their father’s posthumous collection *Poems on Several Occasions* (1748) to include forged verses of their own. At the other end of the scale of traditional respectability, meanwhile, the much-reviled – and extremely prolific – Richard Blackmore is given a fresh look by Pat Rogers in his discussion of poetry and

natural philosophy; Ashley Marshall's 'Satire' chapter returns satirists such as William Gifford and 'Peter Pindar' to their central place in the political culture of late Georgian Britain; and Antonia Forster's survey of reviewing culture notes the 'important corrective' that reading poetic reviews offers to 'our historically filtered sense of a canon'. 'We see the work of long-forgotten poets given far more pages than, for example, the *Lyrical Ballads*', she writes (p. 729).

Historical awareness inflects many of the conclusions in this volume. James McLaverty's chapter on 'Poems in Print' emphasises the 'inbuilt tendency toward variation' (p. 53) that characterised print in the period, and urges us to attend to the ways in which particular stages in the life of a poem's textual development may be crystallised – sometimes undesirably – for generations of future readers. Anna Foy's chapter on 'Epic' applies historical thinking to a poem that has in the past often managed to escape it, Milton's *Paradise Lost*: Foy notes Milton's creative debts to 'less-known seventeenth-century English experiments in the genre', and highlights the need to reassess his early reception in the light of the royalist epics that were setting 'the norms for the genre' in the period (p. 474). Marcus Walsh's 'Allusion' chapter is a good example of historically informed close reading, interrogating what eighteenth-century poets thought they were doing when they alluded, and picking up on the false notes as well as the true ones that their allusive echoes would have struck for early readers.

With a couple of exceptions, the great majority of chapters in this handbook do a fine job of balancing critical argument with breadth of survey. Errors are few and far between – 'William II' would perhaps have been surprised to learn it was he and not William III whose 'enthronement' Dryden despaired at in 1689 (p. 486). If there is one larger fault to find, it is that a number of the chapters' bibliographies are not as up to date as they might be: across the whole handbook, a sweep of reference lists reveals just forty-seven works cited dating from 2010 or later, and sixty-seven works of criticism dating from before 1970. Although the field of Restoration and eighteenth-century poetry still owes a lot to the criticism of the last century

(particularly the flourishing of criticism on the subject between 1930-1970), it is a particularly lively one at present, and perhaps a little more of this life ought to come across in the handbook's bibliographies. Nevertheless the essays represented here are vibrant and timely, and the collection will stand as a touchstone for scholars and students for many years to come.

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