



MARILYN SPEERS BUTLER

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1937–2014

MARILYN BUTLER WAS THE LEADING British romantic scholar of her generation, whose books *Maria Edgeworth: a Literary Biography* (1972), *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (1975), *Peacock Displayed* (1979) and *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries* (1981), as well as numerous essays and articles, introductions and editorial collections, redefined our understanding of the period and its literature. Displaying an immense knowledge gleaned from wide reading across disciplinary boundaries, her books and articles have stood the test of time, and are still read with pleasure by students and researchers alike, more than a decade after her publishing career was sadly terminated by illness. Their boldness, accessibility and urbanity aptly represent Marilyn's engaging personality, her irreverent wit and love of intellectual argument. The guiding principle of her historical criticism was that 'the writings of the past ask for an educated reading, as far as possible from within their own discourse or codes or cultural system'.¹ This was a creed that challenged the 'New Critical' and subjectivist principles that guided post-war literary study, as well as the structuralist and post-structuralist criticism that sought to displace it in the 1970s and 1980s. Marilyn always read far beyond the received canon, questioning the very concept of 'romanticism' itself as it was understood by twentieth-century critics: Paul Hamilton puts it nicely when he writes about the relationship between the canon and the archive in which 'must reside the alternatives that made the canon a choice, a risk, an election, a

¹M. Butler, 'Against tradition: the case for a particularized historical method', in J. McGann (ed.), *Historical Studies and Literary Criticism* (Madison, WI, 1985), p. 43.

political act ... official literary history is [always] shadowed, in Butler's work, by other possible literary choices and histories'.²

Central to her project of challenging the canon of six romantic male poets was her critical reassessment of the role of women writers, whether established figures such as Jane Austen, then lesser-known women such as Mary Wollstonecraft and Maria Edgeworth, and no one else perhaps did more to bring about this fundamental step change in contemporary understandings of romanticism. Although her relationship to 1970s feminism (and indeed to the politics of the British New Left) was more that of a critical fellow-traveller than of a wholehearted partisan, Marilyn never tired of reminding fellow academics that 'students of literature, like readers of novels, are predominately female, a demographic fact which male producers of literary criticism forget at their peril'.³ But her liberal, 'second-wave' feminist convictions informed her professional trajectory as well as her work: as the first female King Edward VII Professor of English at Cambridge, and as Rector of Exeter College, Oxford (she was the first woman head of a traditionally all-male college), she energetically challenged the 'glass ceiling' limiting the career development of women academics. If her published scholarship has influenced a whole generation of male as well as female critics, she also deserves special credit for having inspired women academics to challenge the barriers that still effectively block female advancement.

Although Marilyn Butler's professional career was centrally located in the 'golden triangle' of Oxford, Cambridge and London, she was in fact something of an interloper, which undoubtedly influenced her 'devolutionary' understanding of romanticism. She was born Marilyn Speers Evans on 11 February 1937 in Kingston upon Thames, to Trevor (later Sir Trevor) Evans and his wife Margaret (née Gribbins). Her father commuted into central London to work as the redoubtable industrial and labour correspondent for the *Daily Express*. (Apparently Kingston was chosen because it was the destination of the only train that left Fleet Street after 4 a.m., the hour of the *Express's* last edition.) Before entering journalism Trevor Evans, who hailed from a family of Welsh-speaking coalminers, had worked down the Abertridwr pit in Glamorgan. The Welsh connection explains why, at the outbreak of war in 1939, Marilyn was evacuated

²P. Hamilton, 'Introduction', in H. Glen and P. Hamilton (eds.), *Repossessing the Romantic Past* (Cambridge, 2006), p. 3.

³M. Butler, *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (Oxford, 1975; reprint with new introduction, 1987), p. xxvi.

with her English mother and brother to board with her father's cousins at New Quay in Ceredigion. In an unpublished auto-obituary written for Dr Jane Mellanby of St Hilda's College, Oxford, Butler gives a wonderful glimpse of how she 'acquired a permanent sense of Welshness from a childhood spent on this coast, with its long sandy beaches and spectacular caves. More Evans cousins, living further inland, ran a pub with smallholding attached. Memories included falling off a haystack, luckily accompanied by a bale of hay, feeding swill to pigs and (illegally) drinking warm milk fresh from the cow. School instruction was in Welsh and English.'⁴ As a girl she might unknowingly have crossed paths with Dylan Thomas, who was also living in New Quay in the early 1940s:⁵ by the end of the war she spoke fluent Welsh and had acquired what her son Ed calls her 'internal Celt'. She was already a prodigious reader, and her cousin Val Atkinson recalls that after 'lights out' in New Quay 'she would serialize books that she had read for me. I remember "The Three Musketeers": I realize now she could only have been seven.'⁶ Through her father, Marilyn made the acquaintance of many Labour Party luminaries, and that Welsh socialist background is glimpsed in a revealing aside in her 1983 review of a book by Raymond Williams. Although she was generally admiring of Williams's work (see below), a characteristically acerbic note is struck when she writes of Williams's 'dignified detachment, which his friends think of as magisterial, and others think of as ponderous'; little sympathy is given to his claim to 'belong with an illiterate and barely literate majority'. 'The boy from Abergavenny Grammar School', Butler retorts, 'never sounds like the type of Welsh autodidact who emerged from the Mechanics Institutes, or—as my own father remembered his fellow workers in the pit, to the disbelief, it must be confessed, of his children—who walked about the mountainsides after chapel, debating philosophy.'⁷

Returning to Surrey after the war, Marilyn attended Wimbledon High School between 1947 and 1954 as a non-fee-paying, eleven-plus student. Here she received some inspiring teaching, and the year after her arrival managed to beat the rest of the school in a general knowledge quiz (her precociousness might be explained by the fact that the journalistic household

⁴Unpublished Auto-Obituary for Dr Jane Mellanby, St Hilda's, Oxford. No pagination. Thanks to Heather Glen for procuring me a copy.

⁵As pointed out by Mary-Ann Constantine in her unpublished paper 'Marilyn Butler and romantic Wales', *Marilyn Butler and the War of Ideas: a Commemorative Conference*, Chawton House Library, 11–12 December 2015.

⁶Marilyn Butler *Memorial Service Pamphlet*.

⁷M. Butler, 'Literature and the left', *London Review of Books* (18 August 1983), pp. 2, 4.

in Kingston received six newspapers every day). Despite this minor triumph, Butler later quipped that ‘she would not recommend adolescence if there were a viable alternative’, a sentiment no doubt shared by many. In 1955, in a more considerable triumph, she won an exhibition to St Hilda’s College, Oxford, following her elder brother Richard (born 1935, who had gone up to Durham) to become the first family members to attend university: although initially set to study History, she was ‘turned’ by an inspiring production of Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus*, fascinated by the way in which the play ‘made the outcome seem inevitable, while the history [as related in Plutarch] made it seem accidental’. This made her opt to study English Literature instead, as ‘the artistic representation of history’.⁸ She later recalled that she ‘found Oxford dreamlike, medieval and utterly ravishing. I think I was forty before I grew out of my teenage infatuation with the place.’⁹

There is no doubt that she blossomed in mid-1950s Oxford, rising to the challenge of tutorials with the formidable Dame Helen Gardner, as well as Anne Elliott, Dorothy Whitelock and Celia Sisam. The highly traditional Oxford curriculum was supplemented by her involvement with the Critical Society, which provided a forum in which ‘young faculty, graduates and undergraduates (Wallace Robson, Christopher Ricks, Emrys Jones, Roger Lonsdale, Gillian Thomas [later Gillian Beer]) read papers and argued’. She embraced the manifold opportunities of university life, writing for *Isis* and *Cherwell*, and working backstage on a number of significant theatrical performances. But politics, and the rise of the New Left, seems to have dominated her extra-curricular activities, even if, as Stuart Hall archly recollected, she was ‘not a student radical, but very very intelligent’.¹⁰ The Suez affair and the Soviet invasion of Hungary energised the undergraduate political scene, and she was an active participant in the Socialist Club, where Gabriel Pearson (later a boyfriend), Raphael Samuel and Stuart Hall were active debaters, joined a year later by the Canadian philosophy student Charles Taylor. She marched to Aldermaston with a copy of *Paradise Lost* in her bag—she had two days to read it for a tutorial—and recalled that ‘My social life, my love life and my education all coalesced after Suez, and made a kind of sense of the rest of my time at Oxford.’ Pearson and his circle were involved in *Universities and Left Review*, soon to be rebranded as

⁸J. Wallace, ‘The sociable revolutionary’, *Times Higher Education* (15 September 1995), p. 1.

⁹M. Butler, ‘An undergraduate at St Hilda’s’, unpublished memoir. My thanks to Heather Glen for providing me with a copy.

¹⁰Wallace, ‘The sociable revolutionary’, p. 2.

New Left Review, and centrally concerned with the relationship of politics and aesthetics: the formative influence of this connection on her thought is underlined in Marilyn's recollection that 'theirs was a style of criticism which was more historical and sociological than the "close reading" or "new criticism" I had been taught'. Despite distancing herself from aspects of the *New Left Review* circle in her later work, it was undoubtedly a major influence.

In an illuminating reflection on her own intellectual formation at Oxford (in the 1987 introduction to a new edition of *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas*), Butler recalled her impatience with what she called 'the airless nirvana created of Austen's world' by academics such as Lionel Trilling and F. R. Leavis. 'We British students of the late 1950s were extraordinary battered, it now seems to me, by exhortations to rise to moral challenges' in the light of Suez and the invasion of Hungary: politicised by the writings of 'Osborne, Amis, Wain, and (my circle's favourite) Doris Lessing... [we] hardly needed our academic seniors to tell us to be serious. What did seem surprising was their apparent belief that the moral life should be led privately or domestically behind closed doors.'¹¹ By her third year she was on an intellectual high, one negative effect of which was the start of the insomnia that dogged her through adulthood. Her husband David remembers often waking up in the middle of the night with the light turned on next to him, as Marilyn scribbled down in a notepad what she referred to as her 'night thoughts', and the BBC World Service often provided nocturnal relief when she was at conferences.

She made many close women friends at St Hilda's, but in a sense this was a 'pre-feminist' decade. In her memoir of college life, she reflected that 'our contemporary Dennis Potter wrote a play a decade later about a miner's son like himself who goes to Oxford. Like Braine, Osborne et al, [first generation Oxonians of this generation] seemed to think cultural alienation was a problem unique to working-class boys, but middle-class girls also encountered it, and for us the issue of virginity became a key.' In general, she felt that her talented female set at St Hilda's in the end underperformed, except for those who pursued graduate study in the USA. 'What seems odd now, even appalling, is that we did not seem to feel knowledge would change us, empower us, make us valuable to ourselves and to others.' Of her five St Hilda's friends who married and had children, she alone was able to return to professional life afterwards: Oxford women still felt abashed to aspire to serious leadership roles. She graduated with a First in 1958.

¹¹ Butler, *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas*, p. xiii.

After Oxford, she worked briefly as a supply teacher for two months in an unruly South London secondary modern school, followed by a year as Assistant English Mistress at the Perse Girls' School, Cambridge. But journalism beckoned and, winning a place in a BBC trainee scheme in News and Current Affairs, from 1960 she worked in newsrooms in London and Manchester, and then as a BBC talks producer. Journalism influenced her clear, jargon-free academic style, and her love of the summary précis, avoiding dense, intellectually allusive formulations: she described her writing as the product of 'the daughter of a man who wrote for 12 million people every day'.¹² This was particularly inexplicable for American admirers, especially 'New Historicists' who were accustomed to more highly conceptualised writing: a leading exponent, Marjorie Levinson, praised her 'cool descriptive style' and tried to argue that 'the absence of theory from Butler's work is, I believe, (I speak of reasons and meanings, not purposes and causes), an act of sabotage'.¹³ Such a view seems unconvincing, as she simply preferred to write the way that she spoke, and never regarded herself as an academic saboteur, although she would have happily accepted the role of iconoclast. A more personal outcome of her brief period with the BBC was her engagement and marriage in 1962 to the noted psephologist David Butler (knighted in 2011), a political commentator and Fellow of Nuffield College, Oxford, whom she had 'put on air'. This was the start of a happy fifty-two-year marriage, based on a companionable and affectionate relationship between two people of very different characters, but who always supported and complemented each other. Marriage was one of the reasons why Marilyn abandoned journalism in order to return to Oxford to begin doctoral work, but she always emphasised that this was a conscious career choice rather than wifely self-sacrifice. She had originally planned to write a book on Jane Austen and politics (the topic of one of her undergraduate essays), but David suggested that she turn her attentions instead to the writings of his great-great-aunt, the neglected Irish novelist Maria Edgeworth. The family connection, he concedes, might have been something of a carrot in their courtship: after all his sister Christina Colvin was working at the Bodleian on Edgeworth's correspondence, and proved an invaluable support to Marilyn's research.

The completion of her DPhil in 1966 helped secure her a Research Fellowship at St Hilda's, and after some revision it was published as

¹²Wallace, 'The sociable revolutionary', p. 2.

¹³M. Levinson (ed.), *Rethinking Historicism: Critical Readings in Romantic History* (Oxford, 1989), p. 4.

Maria Edgeworth: a Literary Biography in 1972, and was awarded a British Academy prize. In the acknowledgements, Marilyn thanks her supervisors Roger Lonsdale and Rachel Trickett, while also acknowledging an ‘incalculable debt’ to Christina Colvin. No previous biographer had enjoyed access to Edgeworth’s 2,000-plus letters, and the almost equally large body of letters of members of her immediate family; consequently, they had been over-dependent on the filtered correspondence published in the authorised *Memoir* of 1887. Marilyn certainly knew that she wasn’t dealing with a minor writer here: she later insisted that, despite a tendency by some Irish critics to underrate Edgeworth as an English, Protestant and ‘colonialist’ figure, ‘she can claim to be Ireland’s most innovative, prolific, and influential writer between Swift at the beginning of the eighteenth century and Yeats at the end of the nineteenth century, and its most distinguished writer of any period’.¹⁴ She particularly warmed to the Irish works such as *Castle Rackrent*, *Ennui*, *The Absentee* and *Ormond*, in which Edgeworth ‘subversively ... brought Irish humour and French wit into conjunction’.¹⁵ Moreover, the fact that Edgeworth (rather than Austen) was her launch pad turned out to be formative for Marilyn’s subsequent research, a point to which I will return.

David’s support during the first eight years of their marriage enabled her to give birth to and raise three sons, Daniel, Gareth and Edmund, to finish the Edgeworth research, and to begin work on the book that became *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas*, published in 1975. She was freed from the time-consuming demands of teaching that usually make life especially difficult for women academics simultaneously trying to start their careers and their families. In a 1995 interview with Jennifer Wallace, Butler stated that ‘the inevitable interruptions from small children did not spoil the reading of Jane Austen, because Austen usefully did not write ‘such long books’ and she kept herself to ‘finite chapters’ that could be read in between transporting children to and from school’.¹⁶ Her scholarly achievement was recognised by her first tenured academic appointment in 1973 (at the age of thirty-six) as Fellow and Tutor in English of St Hugh’s College, Oxford, and the decade that followed proved to be immensely productive. It was also a ground-breaking appointment for women in the heavily male-dominated university: Helen Watanabe remembered that ‘her wise counsel

¹⁴ M. Butler, ‘General introduction’, in J. Desmarais, T. McLoughlin and M. Butler (eds.), *Novels and Selected Writings of Maria Edgeworth*, Vol. 1 (London, 1999), p. vii.

¹⁵ M. Butler, ‘Introduction’, in M. Butler (ed.), *Castle Rackrent and Ennui* (Harmondsworth, 1992), p. 8.

¹⁶ Wallace, ‘The sociable revolutionary’, pp. 3–4.

was very much appreciated when we were designing and setting up Women's Studies at Oxford. She really changed things—academically, structurally and personally.¹⁷ In a 1986 article, Ros Ballaster praised Marilyn for her role in establishing the Woman's Writing Paper in 1985 (with Dr Julia Briggs), claiming that she was 'one of the few senior women fellows at Oxford ... and probably the only woman fellow prepared to stick her neck out for feminist work in the English Faculty'.¹⁸

The importance of *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* lay in its historically contextualised and political readings of the novels, skilfully demonstrating how Austen gave flesh to the ideological values of British conservatism during the *kulturkampf* triggered by the French Revolution. Butler's historicism, however, looked rather different from that associated with Marxism, which she criticised for economic determinism, and an overreliance on 'monolithic categories of historical explanation'.¹⁹ By contrast she denominated her own empirically grounded work as 'particularized criticism', based as it was on painstaking archival recovery, insisting that because 'a genre is an established code, a medium of communication already learned by writer and reader; to participate with Jane Austen, we have to be ready to re-learn the code her first readers already knew'.²⁰ The book pays tribute to Austen's artistic achievement, the way she 'uses irony and verbal nuance to give her a dramatist's detachment, so that the consciousness is only one actor in a total drama' (p. 293). *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma* are judged as the greatest novels, to the extent that they are 'critical of the consciousness, and test their heroes by their actions' (p. 296). At the same time, she writes that Austen's 'happy endings cannot resolve the clash of values which she sets out to describe, because it is hardly the power of art to resolve them. Art merely mimes its resolutions, without real intent or power to deceive' (p. 299).

But much of the book's originality arises from the fact that Austen's art is measured and compared with that of the cosmopolitan Anglo-Irish novelist Maria Edgeworth, providing a radically different cultural perspective upon romantic literature from Austen's 'home-counties' English

¹⁷ *Memorial Service Pamphlet*.

¹⁸ R. Ballaster, 'The singular woman', *News from Nowhere*, 2 (October 1986), 28–9.

¹⁹ Although in the 1987 retrospect she acknowledges her failure to cite the work of Raymond Williams, whom we have already seen her criticising for his views on working-class Welsh literacy: here Butler recognized that Williams 'could at least have been cited as evidence that historicism and an extreme degree of abstraction do not have to go together': Butler, *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas*, p. xviii.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. xxxi. Henceforward pagination given in text.

model. Austen could have opted to follow Edgeworth's French, Enlightenment example as a novelist, rather than the English tradition of the 'proper lady' writer (the term coined by Mary Poovey), in trying to pull the novel out of the partisan conflict between Jacobins and anti-Jacobins in the 1790s, but 'she left it largely alone' (p. xxxviii). This was clearly an ideological choice on Austen's part, a function of what Butler described as her deep-grained English conservatism: 'the reforms she perceives to be necessary are within the attitudes of individuals; she calls for no general changes in the world of the established lesser landed gentry' (p. 2). At the same time, Butler's approach reminds us that Maria Edgeworth and Sir Walter Scott, the leading anglophone novelists of Austen's time, were Irish and Scottish respectively, although Austen's rising star would increasingly reclaim the 'Englishness' of English literature in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, eclipsing both their reputations.

Butler's third book was *Peacock Displayed: a Satirist in Context* (London, 1979) which, although the least widely read of her works today, marked another crucial stage in her intellectual development, shaping much of her subsequent thinking about romanticism. Focusing on the relatively unknown figure of Thomas Love Peacock, learned, classical, liberal, secular and above all a satirist, Marilyn offered a new perspective for understanding the Shelley, Byron and Keats generation. Peacock's erudite mockery of the irrationalism and conservative inwardness of Wordsworth's *Excursion* or Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* was for Butler a key to the concerns of the post-1810 writers. *Nightmare Abbey* and *Melincourt* are brilliant comic satires on the self-absorption of post-war romanticism and its melancholy cult of poetic genius; novels of ideas no less than those of Edgeworth, they expose the idols of the age by subjecting them to conversational critique and intellectual satire, the liberal writer's arsenal in waging 'a war of ideas'. As Stuart Tave noted in an insightful review, the book was at its best when revealing Peacock's reading in his contemporaries, demonstrating Butler's magisterial knowledge of romantic periodicals (later developed in her 1993 essay 'Culture's medium: the role of the review', still the best short study of Romantic periodicals).²¹ According to Butler's reading, Tave writes, '[Peacock] is a writer dependent on contemporary intellectual conflicts to which, with his method of literal textual quotation, he can continually allude'. Where this documentary context was not forthcoming, however, as in *Maid Marian*, the analysis

²¹ M. Butler, 'Culture's medium: the role of the review', in S. Curran (ed.), *Cambridge Companion to British Romanticism* (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 120–47.

could succumb to blandness, because ‘lacking a genuine movement of ideas in England currently expressed in one or more controversial documents’.²² Tave suggests that one of the risks the book runs in attempting to resurrect Peacock’s reputation is to present an author who ‘may seem to require a more highly specialized knowledge and become a more academic property’: in other words, Peacock’s chance of resurrection was over-dependent on a scholarly reconstruction of his intellectual context because (unlike Austen or Edgeworth) his works could not stand alone.²³ Sadly, this caveat has been borne out by the fact that Peacock, unlike many other ‘marginalised’ figures resurrected by Butler (Edgeworth, Wollstonecraft, Edward Williams, Southey), has never quite made it to the top table of the new romantic canon, despite the obvious attractions of a novel such as *Nightmare Abbey* for initiating a university course on the romantics.

The same reviewer noted presciently that *Peacock Displayed* contained another ‘bigger book inside struggling to get out ... an intellectual history of the period from the 1790s to the 1830s [focusing] on the central figure of Shelley’.²⁴ That book was Marilyn Butler’s magisterial survey *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries: English Literature and its Background 1760–1830*, published two years later in 1981 in Oxford’s Opus series (selling in paperback at a modest £3.95). Along with the Austen book, it is still the most widely read of her works, and has stood the test of time, regularly featuring on university course reading lists. *Romantics, Rebels, and Reactionaries* was dedicated to questioning the unitary definition of romanticism, and its canonical study as practised mainly in North America: its principal targets were Harold Bloom and other members of the Yale School, Northrop Frye, and M. H. Abrams. ‘For Bloom and for critics like him,’ wrote Butler, ‘poets as poets exist primarily in their internalized imaginative worlds, and in relation to one another, which is why the two great writers who most favour imagination [Blake and Wordsworth] are allowed to set the pattern for the rest.’²⁵ She pleaded instead for literature as a ‘collective activity’, ‘powerfully conditioned by social forces, what needs to be and what may be said in a particular community at a given time—the field of the anthropologist, perhaps, rather than the

²² S. Tave, ‘Review of Marilyn Butler, *Peacock Displayed*’, *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 35 (1981), 548.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 549.

²⁵ M. Butler, *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries: English Literature and its Background, 1760–1830* (Oxford, 1981), p. 185. Henceforward pagination given in text.

psychologist' (p. 9). The first couple of chapters ('The arts in the age of revolution' and 'Art for the people in the revolutionary decade: Blake, Gillray, Wordsworth') established a broad, interdisciplinary context for the core chapters, addressing the effects of the French revolution and the British reaction to it, arguing that the writing that immediately preceded and followed the revolutionary and Napoleonic wars represented English literature 'at its most glorious'.

The book is polemical in tone, addressing prose writing and the novel, graphic satire and print culture as well as poetry; it is rather light on close reading, in accord with a survey aimed primarily at undergraduates. Butler established an influential distinction between the first romantic generation's immersion in popular culture (ballads and popular prints), compared to the more classically orientated, high cultural pursuits of the second generation of Keats, Shelley, Byron, Peacock and Hazlitt, with their 'cult of the south'. Developing the impetus of the Peacock book, critical sympathy is shifted from Wordsworth and Coleridge (perhaps over-identified here, as elsewhere in Marilyn's criticism, with reactionary solipsism) to the Shelley–Peacock circle, 'the English liberal writers of the post-war period' who are valued for being 'extrovert not introvert, and pagan not Christian' (p. 124), albeit 'in tone much less optimistic than their pre-war precursors' (p. 125). Michael Rossington, Marilyn's PhD student at this time, senses that she had a strong personal identification with Shelley in particular, and his much-misunderstood politics; 'an almost intuitive understanding of what Shelley was up to, tactically, I mean, the strategic impulses that motivated him, his extraordinary range of reading and his relentless making of connections'.²⁶ Chapter 4, 'Novels for the gentry: Austen and Scott', takes as its focus a reaction on the part of the English novel against radical sensibility, which is dismissed as 'egotistical, solipsistic and potentially anarchic' (p. 104), and in support of re-establishing traditional social hierarchies, the hallmarks of these two great conservative writers of the second decade. In Chapter 6, Butler returns to the familiar trope of 'the war of the intellectuals', once again giving her favourite Peacock central stage with his satire *Melincourt*; and in a brilliant contextualised reading of Keats's *Hyperion* she proposes that 'the poetic mode of the years from 1817 to 1822 probably produced more great works than any comparably short time in our literature', to the extent that it was simultaneously 'formalistic and experiential, traditionalist and progressive' (p. 154).

²⁶ Personal e-mail correspondence, 18 December 2016.

Despite its extraordinary range and boldness in resetting the agenda for romantic studies, however, *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries* now looks quite canonical compared to some of Butler's subsequent work: it paid little attention to women or labouring-class writers, said little about empire and orientalism, and used the term 'English Romanticism' boldly throughout to describe writing from the whole archipelago. So, for instance, while the fourth chapter 'Novels for the gentry' rang the changes by situating Jane Austen's novels between Edgeworth and Scott, it saw no need to finesse geopolitical differences between Ireland, England and Scotland, perhaps surprising for a book dedicated to restoring nuanced literary contexts. Butler concluded with a telling critique of the theoretical mindset of her own profession, which she compared rather unfavourably with that of the historian: 'going out to look for "Romanticism",' she animadverted, 'means selecting in advance one kind of answer. No intellectual discipline, certainly not philosophy, condones such a procedure, while the historian has no foolproof protection against it. But he has some safeguards in his empiricism, and in a methodology which gives weight both to the collection of evidence and to analysis as opposed to synthesis' (p. 186). This was provocative stuff for a literary-critical generation that had been raised on Derrida and De Man.

Reviews of *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries* were mixed, although most recognised that this was a book with a difference that would have the power to shape subsequent discussion, for better or worse. Tony Boorman complained (in a sardonically titled review 'Collectivizing the romantics') that 'in Mrs Butler's panoramic survey [...] no one is admitted ever to have said anything highly characteristic of himself; the writers of the past are now allowed only to have said things highly characteristic of the age they lived in'.²⁷ He proceeded to condemn it as a 'determinedly anti-humanist book, which is founded on the contention that, in an almost literal sense, the works of Romantic literature are children of the age; they are group productions, and "had no first author"'.²⁸ The tools of critical discrimination seemed absent; the creative quiddity of the individual author was ignored by Butler's blanket historicism. Marshall Brown made a similar point in his strictures on Butler in his 1991 study *Preromanticism*: 'Where history makes literature in this fashion, it seems safe to say, literature does

²⁷T. Boorman, 'Collectivizing the romantics: English literature and its background 1760–1830', *English*, 31 (1982), 151.

²⁸Ibid.

not make history.²⁹ But Butler was defended from charges of reductionism by Michael Scrivener, a more sympathetic reviewer, who wrote that ‘one leaves her history not with a smug sense that each text can now be pigeon-holed into a social category, but with a new sense of wonder, since the literature is now mediated primarily not by our own contemporary notions of what constitutes “Romanticism” but by the remarkable culture created by men and women who lived in a different era, with their own urgent concerns.³⁰ Christopher Ricks concurred, noting in his review for the *London Review of Books* that ‘[t]he spirit of Marilyn Butler’s excellent book on the Romantics is itself that of citizenship: of belonging to a civilised community, cultural and intellectual, which one helps to sustain and is sustained by’.³¹ There is little doubt that Ricks’s and Scrivener’s positive judgements have prevailed.

Remarkably enough, *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries* was Marilyn’s last published monograph, although the posthumous publication in 2015 of her *Mapping Mythologies: Countercurrents in Eighteenth-Century British Poetry and Cultural History* (edited by her close friend and Cambridge colleague Heather Glen), presents another full-scale study completed when she was at the height of her powers, but never finally revised for publication. The book was written during her tenure of a three-year British Academy Readership that she was awarded in 1982, which she later recalled enabled her to initiate ‘a more generalised exploration of Romantic period writing, considered both as intellectual history and commercial age culture’. *Mapping Mythologies* laid the groundwork for two other books that she never managed to complete: a sequel volume on Shelley, Byron and Orientalism, and a study of eighteenth-century women writers. It appears that research on the second, sequel volume prompted her to defer the publication of *Mapping Mythologies*, perhaps so that the two books might be published together. But in the end, all three projects were stalled by her massively increased workload after taking up the Cambridge Chair: they might have been completed in retirement if she hadn’t been tragically overtaken by illness, so it is wonderful to have even one of them now before the public. *Mapping Mythologies* (not incidentally

²⁹ M. Brown, *Preromanticism* (Stanford, CA, 1991), p. 15.

³⁰ M. Scrivener, ‘Review of *Romantics, Rebels, and Reactionaries*’, *Criticism*, 24 (1982), 286.

³¹ C. Ricks, ‘Citizens’, *London Review of Books*, 3, 21 (19 November 1981), 7. These remarks on the contemporary reviews are indebted to my Glasgow colleague Matthew Sangster’s unpublished paper ‘Romantics, rebels and reactionaries: past, present and future’, presented at *Marilyn Butler and the War of Ideas: a Commemorative Conference*, Chawton House Library, 11–12 December 2015.

Butler's original title) starts with an analysis of the eighteenth-century 'country party' poets James Thomson and Thomas Akenside, before proceeding to study the imagining of 'alternative versions of the nation' in the writings of Thomas Gray, Collins, 'Ossian' Macpherson, Thomas Chatterton, Edward Williams ('Iolo Morganwg'), Blake, Burns and Wordsworth. These poets are commonly distinguished by their interest in 'non-Christian mythologies—stories from ancient times and often from foreign parts, which convey the social and religious practices and beliefs of an alien society'.³² But popular antiquarianism—the eighteenth-century version of native cultural anthropology or folklore studies—also looms large in the story that the book tells, and Butler unearths an alternative and indigenous version of tradition underpinning British poetry in these decades, quite different from that of the official metropolitan culture of Church and State.

In her introduction, Glen suggests that *Mapping Mythologies* was Marilyn's answer to criticism of the historicism of *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries*, to the extent that it addressed 'a series of writers who saw the poet as maker of history, often in a peculiarly literal sense... Her concern is less with the ways in which their writings were shaped by their historical circumstances than with their understandings of those circumstances and the creative strategies that are manifest in the works they produced in response to them.'³³ This said, it is not the book that we might (at least with hindsight) have expected her to write in the early 1980s, to the extent that it is entirely dedicated to male poets, most of them (with the exception of Blake and Wordsworth) largely active in the eighteenth century, rather than in the romantic period proper. In my view, the book's real significance lies in a polemical bid to present a new theory of eighteenth-century poetry based on an 'intricate, diverse and stressful relationship' between the metropolitan centre and its provincial and national peripheries, especially Wales and Scotland, which play important roles in the story that she tells, with creative energy generated by the popular traditions of the peripheries. Its principal historical target is Thomas Warton's massive three-volume *History of English Poetry* (1774–81) which, buttressed by an influential lineage of critics from Johnson through Arnold to Eliot and Leavis, established the English critical mainstream. In this respect, *Mapping Mythologies* anticipated the rise of 'archipelagic' or

³²H. Glen, 'Introduction' to M. Butler, *Mapping Mythologies: Countercurrents in Eighteenth-Century British Poetry and Cultural History* (Cambridge, 2015), p. 6.

³³*Ibid.*, p. 19.

‘Four nations’ criticism that transformed our sense of British and Irish cultural history in a devolutionary era, a point to which I will return below.

Along with the publication of an edited anthology, *Burke, Paine, Godwin and the Revolution Controversy* (Cambridge, 1984: still in print and widely used in university courses on romanticism), writing *Mapping Mythologies* brought to a close what Marilyn described as the most prolific period of her academic career. Important and often seminal as were her subsequent publications, they appeared as essays, journal articles, critical introductions, lectures and editions, building on the achievements of her four published monographs but moving into new territory in offering a revised picture of the romantic period. It is much easier to make sense of this brilliant but scattered corpus in the retrospective light of *Mapping Mythologies*; it is like exploring a submerged continent that’s been suddenly uplifted from the ocean bed to reveal formerly scattered islands as connected ridges and massifs.

This change of pace in Marilyn’s research was, ironically, a result of public and professional recognition of her outstanding achievements. In 1986 she was appointed to the prestigious King Edward VII Chair of English Literature at Cambridge, describing this chair as having ‘a special aura, partly because England (unlike Scotland) has no other Regius chair in English, partly because of the high standing of Cambridge English’. She recalled her seven years as holder of the Edward VII Chair, and her Fellowship of King’s College, Cambridge, as ‘the most stimulating of her professional career—but in scholarly terms also the most frustrating’, owing to the weight of professorial responsibilities, which she exercised with great diligence. Her international reputation was consolidated by visiting fellowships at Caltech in 1984 and Chicago in 1992, and she lectured internationally at most of the top dozen American universities, and in Australia, India and Western Europe.³⁴

I first got to know her during this period, when I was still a Cambridge doctoral student, and can well remember being struck by her engaging personality, her immense learning and irreverent humour. She was an energetic presence at seminars and lectures, insisting on always asking at least one question, and was in the habit of scribbling down notes on filing cards, upon which she would subsequently draw for her lectures and articles. I recall her input at the King’s College Intellectual History Seminar (which she convened with Antony Pagden and Stefan Collini) as one of the intellectual highlights of my early career years as a junior lecturer in the

³⁴Quotations here are from Butler unpublished ‘Auto-Obituary ...’.

English Faculty (the other highlight was my supervisor John Barrell's graduate seminars in King's). But I also remember the informal Marilyn: post-seminar sessions in the pub, a long half-an-hour discussion of Byron and orientalism on King's Parade, when I was beginning research in that area, leaving me wondering if she would be late for some important meeting as a result of her affection for informed chat about her current obsessions. She was always approachable and eager to listen, and willing to share her insights and opinions—even the latest faculty gossip—with graduate students and early career researchers: this was in marked contrast to some others of her rank and academic celebrity, who often left us tongue-tied, preferring to cultivate a remote charisma rather than intellectual sociability. The clouds were already gathering over British academia, however, even in the privileged realms of Oxbridge, and Marilyn later regretted that her professional maturity coincided with 'an unprecedented period for universities of cost-saving and externally-imposed change'. She found herself diverted into 'vastly-amplified systems of appraisal and assessment, in her own universities or as an external advisor', sitting on national committees such as the Arts Council Literature Panel and the Council for University English. But she still found time for frequent appearances in the national press or on BBC radio, commenting on literature or educational topics: she understood the meaning of 'impact' long before it entered the official vocabulary of HEFCE and the AHRC.³⁵

Despite the pressures of her professorial duties (not to mention 'a lot of driving through Milton Keynes', given that her family home was in Oxford),³⁶ her intellectual productivity continued unabated, albeit in a rather different mode from the earlier 1980s. Her 1985 essay 'Against tradition: the case for a particularized historical method', written after she had completed work on *Mapping Mythologies*, sought to explain some of the methodological principles of her criticism. The essay was published in the American critic Jerome McGann's collection *Historical Studies and Literary Criticism*, underlining the important connections between McGann's critique of 'Romantic Ideology' and Butler's 'particularized' historical method, but also major differences in terms of their engagement with theory. One of her more acerbic performances, this essay lambasted the ahistoricism of North American romanticists such as Bloom, Abrams and Frye (by now familiar targets), and repeated her strictures on Marxism, although it had more positive things to say about the 'Cambridge

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ 'A singular woman', *The Times*, 28 May 1986.

School' of Quentin Skinner, John Dunn, J. G. A. Pocock et al., despite their tendency to represent 'ideas passing, by the old bad unexplained process, from one Great Thinker to the next'.³⁷ Although nowhere evoked directly, the influence of the great English socialist historian E. P. Thompson is evident in the essay's bid to appropriate 'customs in common' (the alternative native traditions explored in *Mapping Mythologies*) from the clutches of the Right, as well as defending them against New Left modernisers and Althusserians: a presence she acknowledged when she later wrote 'I have long thought [Thompson] one of the most significant, persuasive models for how to write on the literature of the past'.³⁸

Butler also took issue here with Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger's influential collection *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, 1983), for what she took to be a condescending and constructivist tone in its treatment of tradition *tout court*. For example, the editors and some of the book's contributors tended to equate Scottish and Welsh romanticism with inauthenticity, or what Leith Davis, Ian Duncan and Janet Sorensen describe as 'a mystified—purely ideological—commitment to history and folklore' in the service of Celtic nationalism.³⁹ 'A Welsh woman like myself', responded Marilyn, in a passionate (although doubtless somewhat tongue-in-cheek) appeal to personal experience, 'has been brought up to hear massed male choirs extolling the unique merits of "gwlad beirdd a chantorion": ours is the land of bards and singers, says the third line of our national anthem (composed in 1856). It comes as a shock to find that Welsh "traditional" music appears to be no more than a bastardised version of the pop tunes of the 1700s, which in their actual origins were Italian, German, or much more unfortunate, English.'⁴⁰ But 'inventing a tradition maintains your legitimacy, and someone else's lack of it; your mythical past is your defensive strategy in a real present ... a polemic with particularly strong motives for hiding the circumstances which brought it into being'.⁴¹ All traditions are 'invented' earlier or later, but that doesn't make them any less real or potentially empowering, especially for minority nations and sub-cultures.

In her 1989 essay 'Repossessing the past: the case for an open literary history', a revised version of her inaugural lecture as Cambridge's King

³⁷ Butler, 'Against tradition: the case for a particularized historical method', p. 45.

³⁸ M. Butler, 'E. P. Thompson's second front', *History Workshop Journal*, 39 (1995), 72.

³⁹ L. Davies, I. Duncan and J. Sorensen, 'Introduction', in L. Davies, I. Duncan and J. Sorensen (eds.), *Scotland and the Borders of Romanticism* (Cambridge, 2005), p. 1.

⁴⁰ Butler, 'Against tradition: the case for a particularized historical method', p. 38.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

Edward VII Professor of English Literature in November 1987, Butler further refined her position in this respect. Because the lecture was (rather cheekily, given the grandiose occasion) focused on Robert Southey's forgotten orientalist poem *Thalaba the Destroyer*, it had plenty to say about post-colonialism and the critique of orientalism, in the wake of Edward Said's influential 1978 study. (At the time I was working on the book that became *British Romantic Writers and the East*, largely inspired by Marilyn's pioneering scholarship, and I well remember the excitement with which I heard her original lecture.) In resurrecting Southey as the forgotten member of the Lake School triumvirate, companion and collaborator of Wordsworth and Coleridge, she shifted English romanticism eastwards, underlining Southey's fascination with exoticism and the literature of imperial conquest, manifest in densely footnoted, experimental epics such as *Madoc*, *Thalaba* and *The Curse of Kehama*. Such epics, in an implicit challenge to the canonical centrality of Wordsworth, 'quer[y] the formalistic belief in the autonomous great poem, as well as the post-Romantic faith in the independence of the great poet'.⁴² Above all, she approved of Southey because he was 'contentious rather than reassuring, common rather than genteel, provincial rather than metropolitan, international rather than national'.⁴³

'Repossessing the past' continued Marilyn's campaign against current notions of a unitary romanticism, and some of its targets were the same. But she also struck a new note in distancing herself from British metropolitan culture: 'most literature does not speak for the official, London-based "nation". It expressed the view of a sect, a province, a gender, a class, bent more often than not on criticism or outright opposition. For literary purposes, the British Isles have always been what the Australian poet Les Murray recently termed them in the present day, "the Anglo-Celtic archipelago". As a social institution, literature models an intricate, diverse, stressful community, not a bland monolith.'⁴⁴ I think that is a wonderful formulation, although one that hasn't received due credit: Butler's name isn't even mentioned in Robert Crawford's *Devolving English Literature* (Oxford, 1992) nor in Davies, Duncan and Sorensen's *Scotland and the Borders of Romanticism* (Cambridge, 2004), both important works which certainly develop the spirit of her critique. Her essay also invoked

⁴² M. Butler, 'Repossessing the past: the case for an open literary history', in M. Levinson (ed.), *Rethinking Historicism: Critical Readings in Romantic History* (Oxford, 1989), p. 83.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

Peter Burke's magisterial study *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (London, 1978), which positively exemplified what she calls 'Social Baconianism', as well as privileging the Celtic periphery as the site of European romanticism's 'discovery of the people' in the late Enlightenment.

The interest in alternative traditions of 'Repossessing the past' was later followed up by brilliant essays on Robert Burns (in Crawford's *Robert Burns and Cultural Authority*) and 'Popular antiquarianism' in Iain McCalman's *Oxford Companion to the Romantic Age*,⁴⁵ which presented a new cast of intellectual heroes in the perhaps unlikely shapes of Francis Grose, Joseph Ritson, Francis Douce and William Hone. Burns (himself a popular antiquarian, and friend of Grose), she proposed, 'is the first of our cultural nationalists, through his brilliantly imagined construction of modern Scotland. In drawing together a nation, he both anticipates Scott and outdoes him.'⁴⁶ In a similar vein, her 2000 essay 'Irish culture and Scottish Enlightenment: Maria Edgeworth's histories of the future' memorably described Edgeworth's novelistic art as being 'tuned into the vast, open-ended conversation that was Hume and Smith's metaphor for modern society'.⁴⁷ Butler here argued that for the Edgeworths in their defence of popular culture and language, the *Essay on Irish Bulls*, 'there is no British culture as such. Four distinct peoples inhabit the British Isles: English, Scottish, Irish and Welsh, each with a history and cultural traditions, oral and written. Regardless of government and its institutions, it is from their cultural particularity that they define themselves against the others.'⁴⁸ Now, in 2016, Marilyn Butler's 'stressful' version of the Union looks more apposite than Linda Colley's influential account of 'forging the nation' in her 1991 book *Britons*, which told how a unitary Protestant Britain transcended internal differences by rallying against a common French enemy, but at the cost of leaving a question mark over the place occupied by Catholic Ireland, not to mention underestimating the importance of English Dissent.

In 1994, after much soul-searching, Marilyn Butler took up the Rectorship of Exeter College, Oxford, partly to be back in Oxford with

⁴⁵ M. Butler, 'Popular antiquarianism', in I. McCalman (ed.), *Oxford Companion to the Romantic Age: British Culture 1776–1832* (Oxford, 1999), pp. 328–38.

⁴⁶ M. Butler, 'Burns and politics', in R. Crawford (ed.), *Robert Burns and Cultural Authority* (Edinburgh, 1997), p. 111.

⁴⁷ M. Butler, 'Irish culture and Scottish enlightenment: Maria Edgeworth's histories of the future', in S. Collini, R. Whatmore and B. Young (eds.), *Economy, Polity, and Society: British Intellectual History 1750–1950* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 160–1.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 169.

David, but also because she sincerely believed that she could better fight the good fight as the first woman head of a traditionally male Oxbridge college than in the Cambridge English Faculty. When that bastion of male privilege the Oxford and Cambridge Club refused her membership (the first time it had rejected a head of college), David loyally resigned his membership in protest. Her auto-obituary recalled that ‘her new College provided distinctive rewards of fellowship and civility, but also new claims on time. She reverted to praising the Isis more highly than the Cam, and managed to remember her grandchildren’s birthdays. The row of box files labelled with the names of her unpublished books has cost her literary executors unconscionable time.’ After her retirement in 2004, Exeter appointed another woman as Rector, Frances Cairncross, which was a great vote of confidence in Marilyn’s pioneering role. Frances wrote that ‘she was the ideal predecessor. She left me a College that had been transformed by her warmth, her perspicacity and her scholarship. I am lucky and proud to have inherited her mantle.’ Marilyn Butler was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 2002.

Building on her earlier achievement as General Editor (with her friend and colleague Janet Todd) of the seven-volume edition of *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft* (London, 1989), Butler’s major literary endeavour in these busy years was editing (with Mitzi Myers, before the latter’s tragic death in 2000) the twelve-volume *The Novels and Selected Works of Maria Edgeworth* (London, 1999–2003), again for Pickering and Chatto. The Edgeworth edition opens with a seventy-three-page ‘General introduction’ by Marilyn, and as well as being General Editor she had an editorial role in more than half of the volumes. Editing was doubtless more easily combined with her Rectorial duties, easily picked up and laid down during gaps in her busy schedule, in comparison to sustained scholarly writing. In her introduction, she asserts that ‘an edition is not the place to engage in passing critical debates or possibly idiosyncratic interpretations. It is a place for setting out any evidence on why a text came to be written, how it was written, what it alludes to, and if possible what contemporary, now-observed question it was answering.’⁴⁹ Both the Wollstonecraft and Edgeworth editions were major and lasting contributions to recovering the voice of women writers in Anglophone romanticism. Throughout the 1990s she also produced accessible and original introductions to novels by Edgeworth, Godwin, Mary Shelley and Austen—her introduction to

⁴⁹M. Butler, ‘General introduction’, *The Novels and Selected Works of Maria Edgeworth*, Vol. 1, p. vii.

Frankenstein, for example, is a brilliant account of the novel's engagement with vitalism and the romantic life sciences. Another major legacy for contemporary scholarship was the *Cambridge Studies in Romanticism* series, of which she was founding editor, in partnership with her close friend Professor James Chandler of the University of Chicago: initiated in 1990 with studies by Mary Favret and the present author, it now runs to over ninety volumes. As the series manifesto proclaims of British romanticism, 'outside Shakespeare studies, probably no body of writing has produced such a wealth of response or done so much to shape the responses of modern criticism'. Dedicated to publishing work that combined theory with new literary-historical research, *Cambridge Studies in Romanticism* showcased 'the work of both younger and more established scholars, on either side of the Atlantic and elsewhere'. Josie Dixon, series editor for Cambridge University Press, remembers her openness to first monographs based on PhD theses; the author's status was less important to her than the quality of their ideas. She also wrote a lengthy revised *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* entry on Jane Austen about this time, which took nearly a year to complete, possibly because of the as-yet undiagnosed illness against which she was already struggling.⁵⁰

Shortly after Marilyn resigned her Rectorship in 2004, all her plans for a happy and productive retirement were shattered when she was diagnosed with Alzheimer's, a tragic turn of events that both she and her family endured with great courage and perseverance. This cast a shadow over the otherwise happy event of the 2006 publication of her Festschrift volume, *Repossessing the Romantic Past*, edited by Heather Glen and Paul Hamilton (Cambridge, 2006). Her extensive circle of friends, and the wider scholarly community, were deeply saddened by her premature and forced retirement from public life: it was some comfort to know that she was being lovingly cared for by David and her family, as it became increasingly less possible for friends to visit her. The sudden death of her son Gareth, a successful BBC radio producer, from a heart attack at the age of only forty-two, was another terrible blow. As Josie Dixon put it, it is sadly ironic that a career based on language should have ended in silence, especially given Marilyn's tremendous sociability and gift of communication. But she lives on in her writings, and for those who had the privilege to know her, reading her books and articles is akin to hearing her conversation as it was in her prime: generous, clever, sociable, funny and, above

⁵⁰M. Butler, 'Jane Austen (1775–1817)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <http://www.oxforddnb.com.view/article/904> (accessed 23 January 2017).

all, articulate. Her life was movingly celebrated in a memorial service at Exeter College Chapel on 24 April 2014 (she died on 11 March), with the eulogy given by David, and her sons Dan and Ed, and addresses by Heather Glen and Jeri Johnson. Many of her friends, colleagues, former students and admirers gathered for a commemorative conference entitled 'Marilyn Butler and the war of ideas' at Chawton House Library on 11–12 December 2015. Participants were heard to remark that the crackle of ideas and the social warmth of the occasion were a result of Marilyn's invisible presence as she circulated among her old friends and sparring partners: it is certainly a conference that she would have enjoyed as much as we all did. She is greatly missed.

NIGEL LEASK

Fellow of the Academy

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