

NICHOLAS ROE

The Birth of Romance

A Revolution of Feeling: The Decade that Forged the Modern Mind

By Rachel Hewitt

(Granta Books 550pp £25)

Rachel Hewitt's first book, *Map of a Nation*, showed how the institution that created our Ordnance Survey Landranger maps also shaped the United Kingdom. Her new book is similarly ambitious, setting out to chart how the revolutionary 1790s transformed the Western world by inventing some aspects of the modern mind. According to Hewitt, the decade of the French Revolution saw a revolution of feeling, and of feeling about feeling, as 18th-century conceptions of the passions faded and disappointed hopes gradually revealed a modern emotional landscape.

Anyone who has read Blake or Wordsworth knows that a generation of British radicals and intellectuals blazed with enthusiasm for the French Revolution. 'Hey for the ... Millennium! And peace and eternal beatitude be unto the soul of Thomas Paine!' declared the journalist Thomas Holcroft. Hewitt finds something more human in the decade's subsequent passage from beatitude to terror, peace to war, anticipation to regret, optimism to disappointment, happiness to melancholy. In Britain, prosecutions for sedition and treason, intensified by the notorious 'Gagging Acts', saw hundreds – perhaps thousands – of men and women suffer detention, exile, financial ruin, harassment, psychological damage, physical harm, impaired health and, in the case of the Unitarian scholar Gilbert Wakefield, death from the effects of imprisonment. 'Out of the broken, bleeding hopes of the 1790s', Hewitt tells us, came a new 'attitude to emotion' that was more self-centred and inward, with a palette of feelings extending from ecstasy to despondency. The new attitude was 'Romantic', with all of that word's connotations of individualism and alienation, spontaneity and obsession, liberty and enthrallment.

Whereas 18th-century emotions had fostered communities of 'sympathetic exchange', the new approach was centred on personal experience, memory and

imagination, all at a remove from material history. So Wordsworth's 'Tintern Abbey', composed at the end of the decade, quietly detaches itself from contexts to contemplate a 'serene and blessed mood' above and beyond the world of sensations and events. Hewitt traces this cultural revolution through a group biography of five 'initial optimists': the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the philosophers William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft, the experimental physician Thomas Beddoes, and the pioneering photographer Thomas



Portraits of Southey and Coleridge by Robert Hancock, 1796

Wedgwood. Interweaving these lives with the events of the decade, the book is packed with vivid biographical detail and tells its story of the passionate 1790s with flair and human insight. Anyone seeking a single-volume account of this momentous and many-faceted decade should read it.

Hewitt structures her book chronologically and thematically. Its four sections begin with 'Hope' then arc through 'Discouragement' and 'Disappointment' to 'Despair' – broadly speaking, the trajectory of Wordsworth's story of his revolutionary self in *The Prelude*. Although Hewitt aims for a revisionist account, some of the terrain covered is well trodden: the debate

about Burke's *Reflections*, Rousseau's writing on education and Hartley's on emotion, Coleridge's Pantisocracy, the 1794 treason trials, Wedgwood's theories of education, the Irish rising of 1798 and so on. From this familiar territory, Hewitt makes more original forays into medical science and psychology, exploring the hydraulic theory of passions, according to which feelings and desires are actuated by fluid pressure. Dating from the Middle Ages, the hydraulic theory has proved surprisingly durable and survives, Hewitt contends, in some 21st-century claims about the 'operation of emotion'.

Beddoes's medical theories and gas therapies, available at his 'Pneumatic Institution', revealed the revolutionary potential of nitrous oxide, or laughing gas: inhaling it, Beddoes believed, would do more for the poor than Paine's *Rights*

of Man. By spontaneously creating a sense of light-headed, giddy euphoria, nitrous oxide showed that, contrary to earlier conceptions of socially responsible passion, emotions 'might have no moral purpose at all'. The hook of this 'legal high' was already apparent in 1797.

If the book's sections signal milestones in Hewitt's argument, her core narrative is perhaps best represented in her close and sensitive tracking of Wollstonecraft's 'complex and nuanced approach to emotional regulation'. Elsewhere, engaging local detail can at times obscure the route: in mapping history, Hewitt is frequently obliged to tour all kinds of contextual

hinterlands. The account of Pantisocracy (a form of utopian social organisation where all rule equally), for example, tells us about emigration schemes, the *Bounty* mutiny, Joseph Priestley's Pennsylvania, Coleridge's and Southey's undergraduate careers and their courtship of the 'disreputable' Fricker girls. All of this has interest, if not novelty, and anyone looking for a thorough investigation of Pantisocracy will find Hewitt's account helpful. But what of the emotional history of this idealistic community? We hear of the Pantisocrats' 'change of heart', their 'declining hopes' and 'disappointment's darkening outline', yet so far as I can see curiously little is made of the emotional theory that for Coleridge had underpinned the scheme. 'The ardour of private Attachments makes Philanthropy a necessary *habit* of the Soul,' he announced to Southey:

I love my Friend – such as *he* is, all mankind are or *might* be! The deduction is evident – Philanthropy (and indeed every other Virtue) is a thing of *Concretion* – Some home-born Feeling is the *center* of the Ball, that, rolling on thro' Life collects and assimilates every congenial Affection.

Pantisocracy was to be an affective 'center', from which an emotional 'rolling' would collect and assimilate other 'attachments' into a fabric of love. Such, at least, seems to have been the idea. Marriage to the Fricker sisters was conspicuously absent from this view of feeling and friendship, which in some ways recalled earlier ideas of communal and 'sympathetic exchange' that were also jettisoned when the scheme failed. In 1796 Coleridge could be found in luxurious solitude, contemplating 'idle flitting phantasies' that traversed his 'indolent and passive brain'; by 1802, mired in hopeless passion for Sarah Hutchinson, he had arrived at a much darker recognition: 'My genial Spirits fail/... I may not hope from outward Forms to win/The Passion & the Life whose Fountains are within!' As Percy Shelley pointed out, Paine's 'age of revolutions in which everything may be looked for' was also an 'age of despair'.

By focusing on the 1790s, Hewitt brings into focus more protracted factors in the history of emotions, all of which centred on the self – the new industrial

capitalism, evangelicalism, ideas of democracy, the cult of sensibility, even reading habits and the rise of the novel. 'I am studying such a book!' Southey exclaimed to a friend. 'I am inclined to think man is capable of perfection!' The book he had been reading was *Political Justice*, Godwin's two-volume treatise on rational perfectibility in which the 'evil of marriage' is described as a 'system of fraud' – a selfish restriction of sexual fertility. Four years after the publication of this manual for sexual liberation, Godwin and Wollstonecraft married. Both of them had pioneered revolutions of feeling, although Godwin's sexually candid biography of Wollstonecraft had a contrary effect: as Hewitt shows, the book helped foster a reaction that would see the Victorians reinstate sexual stereotypes the 1790s had seemed, for a little while, to have left behind. It would be more than a century before Oscar Wilde and Virginia Woolf took up the cause and created their own revolutionary maps of modern feeling.

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