Review


During his life James Hogg, the Ettrick shepherd, produced a remarkable literary range – from epic and lyric poetry and songs to plays, tales, novels, sermons, treatises, journal articles, and his own periodical. Writing during a particularly complex time in Scottish literary history, and in a style which challenged many of the aesthetic conventions adopted by his contemporaries, Hogg’s literary achievements as a working-class writer were considerable. However, despite this, Hogg has generally been excluded from anthologies and major works of literary criticism, chiefly because of his working-class identity, and his status as a barely educated shepherd.

Only in recent years has there witnessed a more sustained attention to his works. Responding to this long-overdue resurgence of interest, Sharon Alker and Holly Faith Nelson have produced the first edited collection of essays which endeavour to examine the critical implications of Hogg’s writings, and their position within the British and American literary marketplaces. With contributions from a distinguished line-up of scholars, the book, in deeply engaging with the works of, and the roots of Hogg, impresses upon the reader the sheer range of Hogg’s literary ingenuity.

The volume begins with a critical reappraisal of Hogg’s social and literary connections with Walter Scott. This is followed by a discussion of the differing impressions of Scotland held by the two figures, as epitomised
by their conflicting interpretations of Joanna Baillie’s play, *The Family Legend*.

Readers are provided with an invaluable insight into Hogg’s extensive and diverse early reading habits. These included *The Bible*, Allen Ramsay’s *The Gentle Shepherd*, Blind Harry’s poem, *The Life and Adventures of William Wallace* and Thomas Burnett’s *The Sacred Theory of the Earth*. The ways in which Hogg’s works absorbed some of these structural and stylistic aspects is judiciously articulated. The links between these readings are also thoroughly investigated in order to establish the source of Hogg’s meta-textual and self-referential narrative style.

Hogg’s emphasis on presenting himself as an intermediary between the subaltern Scottish experience, most prominently the oral tradition of the Borders, and the Edinburgh literary gentility is expertly discussed. His reliance on folk testimonies, which allowed the decen-tring of narrative authority, and thus gave a voice to those who were seldom heard, is excellently conveyed. For Hogg, personal accounts and folk beliefs were key to tradition. This passion for oral culture and authority of tradition, combined with a determination to empower the voices of the marginalised, excellently contextualises the works of Hogg.

However, it is chapters twelve and thirteen which stand out. The former explores Hogg’s complex relationship with *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* where he fulfilled roles as both a contributor to and as a product in. His extensive battles with the Magazine are powerfully conveyed. Hogg was introduced in *Blackwood’s* both by his own name, and also as a fictional character on a fictional journey, along with other fictional characters. However, this prominent role played by Hogg as a popular character often resulted in him being the subject of insulting and degrading articles, and vicious personal attacks. Because of this denigration of his character, Hogg believed that his reputation as an author and as a person suffered irreparable damage.
Chapter thirteen provides a thorough examination of Hogg’s short story, *The Pongos*. Set in a South African settlement populated by British emigrants, here Alker and Nelson demonstrate how Hogg skilfully merged the discourses of natural history, imperialism and linguistics. They convincingly demonstrate how through his narrative, Hogg revealed the fragility of a language that foundered under the pressure of imperialism, and skilfully depicted a colonial “adventure” that aspired to rule an area that it did not fully understand. Considerable discussion is also given to Hogg’s attempt through the story to confront the relationship between language and power: a theme which he himself could easily empathise with in relation to his own marginalisation by the Edinburgh literary gentility.

This work therefore, is clearly the product of thorough archival research and certainly achieves what it sets out – to publicise the works and the figure of James Hogg. Chapters are supplied with comprehensive references, and an extensive, relevant and useful bibliography. Primary materials located in Edinburgh, New York, South Carolina and Otago have all been consulted, and are supplemented by extensive secondary sources. Readers are introduced to the scope of Hogg’s influence, and to the ways in which through challenging conformity and the demands of a manufactured gentility, he transformed his literary genre. The calibre of this collection certainly makes it essential reading for specialists of Hogg, and for scholars of Scottish and working-class literature. However, styled in a clear and non-intimidating manner, this work also appeals to a wider audience, and has the potential to compel many unfamiliar with Hogg to become more acquainted with the contributions of the Ettrick Shepherd in Scottish literary history.

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