

1-1-2006

Review of *Encyclopedia of the Romantic Era, 1760-1850*, edited by Christopher John Murray; and *A Companion to European Romanticism*, edited by Michael Ferber

Diane Hoeveler

Marquette University, [diane.hoeveler@marquette.edu](mailto:diane.hoeveler@marquette.edu)

## Book Reviews:

**Encyclopedia of the Romantic Era, 1760–1850**, by Christopher John Murray (Ed.) New York, Fitzroy Dearborn/Taylor & Francis Group, 2004

**A Companion to European Romanticism**, by Michael Ferber (Ed.)  
Malden, MA, Blackwell Publishing, 2005

Diane Long Hoeveler

*English, Marquette University  
Milwaukee, WI*

As contemporary scholars and teachers of romanticism, we have been continually confronted with the changing parameters of our field of study. Those of us trained in the British tradition have seen the “canon” expand in ways that would have been unrecognizable twenty years ago. Not only have women writers and marginalized genres like the gothic made a distinct impression on the way the field is currently configured, but increasingly so has our understanding of Europe’s writers and genres forced us to reassess “British” romanticism. As no one is omniscient or a polyglot, guides emerge to help us navigate these transformations in the field. The two resources listed above are the most recent attempts to aid in understanding exactly how the field has shifted, while also providing guidance to those changes.

An already accomplished and experienced editor of encyclopedias, Christopher John Murray has once again produced an extremely valuable research and teaching resource in his latest venture, the *Encyclopedia of the Romantic Era*. This two-volume set is distinguished by its attention to not simply the canonical (and outdated) definition of literary romanticism, but to a broader interdisciplinary studies approach that gives attention to a wide variety of cultural works from Latin America, the United States, the Ukraine, Russia, Eastern Europe, and all of the major Western European nations. Although its price makes it prohibitive for individual faculty or

students to purchase, I would recommend that it be purchased by all university and college libraries, to be held in the Reference section and therefore to be available for class reserves. Given its scope and the sheer number of entries, it is only possible here to outline its purpose, contents, organizational scheme, and finally to assess its strengths and weaknesses as a research and teaching tool.

In his Introduction, Murray states that his intent has been to produce a “cultural encyclopedia” that would “provide a broad-ranging guide to the profound changes in thought, sensibility, and expression that occurred during this era” (ix). The starting date of 1760, somewhat eccentric for those of us working in a field that has been traditionally defined as beginning around 1789, is never clearly defended, apart from claiming that such a date allows us to see many romantic “developments as transitional” (ix). In fact, entries on “Pre-Romanticism” in virtually every European nation bear out the value of the earlier starting date, and also help to support Murray’s claim that there is a current emphasis in romantic scholarship to examine “the relationship between the Enlightenment and the Romantic era (continuity/rupture)” (x).

In addition to the issue of the dates covered by the *Encyclopedia*, the entries themselves are fairly unusual in their international and interdisciplinary focus. For instance, numerous entries were commissioned on the artists and cultural works of Bohemia and Moravia, the Balkans, the Scandinavian countries, Iceland, Greece, Spain and Portugal. Further, there are dozens of entries on architecture, music, dance, science, and art, in addition to the usual sorts of entries that one might expect on literature and thought in a work like this. The inclusion of more Latin American and Eastern European countries—as well as specific entries on “Jewish culture”—is certainly welcome and a valuable addition to the growing global and “multicultural” emphasis that pervades the current “English” classroom. It also, however, begs the question: where is Asia? We know that Japanese gothic works were published as early as 1795 and that Chinese writers were flowering between 1760–1850, and yet they are absent with no explanation. Granted, no *Encyclopedia* can cover every topic exhaustively, but the editor’s decisions about what to include and omit need to be more clearly presented.

As far as organization is concerned, the entries in these two volumes are cross-referenced and connected in useful ways. For instance, the bulk of the entries focuses on individual artists and writers, and then on major works of music, art, or literature. After that, there are a number of surveys intended to give a broad overview of a large topic, like "Britain: Cultural Survey" or "Britain: Historical Survey." Finally, there are entries on themes, concepts, approaches, and events: i.e., the Dandy, Orientalism, the Sublime, Don Juan, the Byronic hero, the French Revolution. In this category there are also a number of entries on critical approaches to the study of the period: Feminist Deconstruction and Romantic Literature or American Romanticism: Approaches and Interpretations. In order to easily access all of these varied entries, the *Encyclopedia* provides at the front of the first volume an Alphabetical List of Entries, a List of Entries by Subject, and a List of Entries by National Developments.

To turn now to an examination of the entries themselves, written by over 250 contributors from all over the world. My survey of the entries suggested two things: they are generally and sometimes too short and not intended for the specialist. The largest number of entries, on authors, begins with presenting an overview of the major works and their importance. This is followed by a very succinct biographical section, a listing of the major works, and then a secondary bibliography of works about the author's primary writings. At times I thought the bibliographies presented were a bit out-of-date and did not reflect the current scholarship on a particular author, but this issue is always a problem with print works. In short, I found the British and American entries more geared to student use, introductory and broad, providing a useful general introduction to an author, work, or theme. The case is not the same for the more unusual entries, however, like those on Iceland or the Balkans. I cannot imagine that traditionally trained Romanticists know as much as they should know about how Romanticism circulated as a discourse system throughout Western and Eastern Europe, and so these more unusual topics are certainly valuable and an excellent resource for specialists seeking to expand their range of expertise.

I would like to comment now on some of the more unusual entries that make this *Encyclopedia* particularly valuable. One section I was particularly impressed by was the sequence of entries on

"Historiography" in Britain, France, Germany, and the United States. A nice complement to the "Historical Overviews" provided for each of these nations, the "Historiography" entries introduce a clear emphasis on Intellectual History and set romanticism into a fuller context. The entries on varieties of religions are also extremely relevant to how romanticism is currently being reevaluated. There are entries on "Catholicism," "Christianity," as well as "Jews" and "Judaism," particularly important in light of the recent emphasis on recognizing the long-ignored importance of Jewish contributions to the field of romanticism. Other particularly valuable entries focus on "Travel Writing" in Britain, France, Germany, and the United States, "Journals and Periodicals" in Germany, Russia, the United States, and the Jewish community. One wonders in this last assortment of entries where Britain and France are, but again, one is grateful for new information rather than yet another rehashing of the familiar.

The final issue that is raised by the entries is not simply their innovative topics but their length and depth of development. It would appear to me that virtually all contributors were given roughly the same instructions as to length. Almost all of the entries appear to be 1,200 words, whether a contributor is detailing Jane Austen's life and works or analyzing Charles-Valentin Alkan, French pianist and composer. Such a strategy leads to a neat layout and clean lines on the page, but it is perhaps not as useful as it might be for the average student of romanticism.

I turn now to the layout of the *Encyclopedia*: it is double-columned, has easy to read type, and is lavishly illustrated. That being said, one has to confront the major criticism that has circulated about this set since its publication. I am speaking about the numerous grammatical and typographical errors that litter the entries. It does not bode well when one sees in the fifth paragraph of the Introduction to the volume a reference to "Jean-Jaogues Rousseau" (x). Dacre's major novel is misspelled as *Zafloya* in the entry on "Gothic Fiction" (439), but spelled correctly in the entry on Dacre. That indicates to me that each contributor was responsible for the accuracy of his or her entry and that the disks submitted went almost immediately to print, a hazardous enterprise for publishers wanting to cut costs and trim staffs. Apart from the errors that have crept in and that one hopes will be corrected should there be a reprint, the *Encyclopedia* is a useful

addition to our pedagogical efforts. I can envision sending students to reserves to check out the basics about an author or topic before beginning a research paper or group presentation. I can also imagine myself using it to learn more about composers, painters, musical trends, or far-flung national romantic developments.

The second resource to be considered, *A Companion to European Romanticism*, is a decidedly different sort of work. Arranged both thematically and by national literatures, the *Companion* has been written by 33 scholars of European Romanticism, including some of the most respected names in the field. The *Companion* is not so much an encyclopedia as it is a series of essays, some longer and more detailed than others, on such topics as "Pre-romanticism," "Shakespeare and European Romanticism," "Scottish Romanticism," and "Byron's Influence on European Romanticism." After these four initial and broad introductory essays, the *Companion* then focuses on five essays on a variety of topics connected to German Romanticism. Of distinction here are the essays by Kari Lokke on the "Romantic Fairy Tale," and Fred Burwick's masterly "German Romantic Drama." Four essays follow on French Romanticism, including pieces on Victor Hugo as a poet and "French Romantic Drama" by Barbara Cooper.

Italian Romanticism is represented by two essays, one on the poetry and one on Ugo Foscolo and Giacomo Leopardi. There is one essay each on Spanish Romanticism and Polish Romanticism, with two on Russian. The final thirteen essays focus on genres and cross national traditions, drawing connections between many writers in disparate countries. Jocelyn Kolb analyzes "Romantic Irony" in an extremely detailed and thorough examination of the topic, while there are essays on the romantic fragment and the romantic ode. No *Companion* would be complete without a discussion of "Nature," and James McKusick provides a strong overview of the subject here. There is also a valuable overview of "Orientalism" in a variety of national literatures by Diego Saglia, and discussions of "Napoleon and European Romanticism" by Simon Bainbridge and "Sacrality and the Aesthetic" by Virgil Nemoianu.

The final selection of essays is fairly original in its conception, particularly the essay by Patrick Vincent on "A Continent of Corinnes: The Romantic Poetess and the Diffusion of Liberal Culture in Europe,

1815–50.” Using de Staël’s heroine as its starting point, this essay surveys the use that a variety of women poets made of the victimized heroine throughout the next forty years. Lilian Furst, one of the pioneering scholars in comparative literature, has contributed an essay on “Night” as a romantic trope, while the last three essays focus on the arts in the romantic tradition: opera, the German romantic song, and the visual arts.

In conclusion, I see the *Companion* as a valuable addition to any scholar’s personal library and think it also would be useful to purchase it for a university or college library, allowing students to have easy access to a variety of clearly written and succinct essays on a number of romantic themes and authors.