

Bruce Gilkison, *Walking with James Hogg: The Ettrick Shepherd's Journeys Through Scotland*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016. 208pp. £14.99. ISBN: 9781474415385.

Dazheng Gao*

“Here, oh, here / We bear the bier / Of the Father of many a cancelled year!” These were Shelley’s words written in the year of 1820, two decades after *Lyrical Ballads* had shaken the ground of eighteenth century’s literary world (96). Defiance is not too rare a watchword for a generation which exerts much of its creative potency on the line of an inherited tradition, from their “fathers,” forging an original form that is altogether new in its language, vocabulary and poetics by consciously breaking loose from the old. Yet the attitude that the romantics adapted towards their literary fathers is at most ambiguous; as the anti-hero Prometheus curses yet owes his freedom to the mercy of the father god. It is conspicuous that Gilkison writes with no real attention paid to Hogg as a romantic. But in spite of the fact that the book is intended to be more about Hogg the man and the forefather, maybe above all Hogg the Ettrick shepherd, as the title goes, than Hogg the poet, Gilkison writes with a fortuitous charm in addressing this father-son discourse. And addressing it not merely as an outsider, but with a mixed sentiment as he confesses how the dust-coated volumes lied years untouched on the shelves of his childhood home as the forgotten remnants of an obscure ancestor, and later how he tried to learn more about him, dusted the books and read them, how he made a journey to know more about him and to come into terms with the role as the great-great-son of a poet who wrote two centuries before his own time. This book culminates all of that.

There are always informative elements in the form of a book alone that reveals much what it is about. It is the more so when the genre is consistently elusive and refuses to be pinned down. Before this book, feats in the similar spirit such as Geoff Dyer’s study of D. H. Lawrence, a record of a frustrated literary pilgrimage in search of the causes of inspiration at stops of Lawrence’s life-long exile, that ultimately turns out a book of autobiographical musing, present fine possibilities. They give the answer to the question that what

* Gao Dazheng, PhD candidate, Department of English Literature, Durham University, United Kingdom (dazheng.gao@durham.ac.uk).

internalised engagement the biographer can attach to the objective recount through chronology. Such a deft dance of style involves the danger of losing the way and the point. For that reason, it is in many ways a vantage point that a book of such sort—part biography, part travelogue, part anecdotal notes—about Hogg is written by a blood and literary descendent. It maps the easy routes out; the son retracing the steps of the father.

The first two chapters add a point of interest to the literature of Hogg's biographical writing, for the "state of nature" (13) which Gilkison makes to be Hogg's origin is not only the Ettrick wild but as a narrative that casts the spell in its own right. Apart from acknowledging the conception of Hogg's image as the autodidactic lyricist rising from vulgarity while retaining his deep roots in the rural lore, Gilkison contends at the same time that he also belongs to a line of ancestry of folklorists, witches and psychics whose primitive and mystical understanding Coleridge so eagerly tried to grasp in his deliberated experiments. It is a mindset which believes beyond any doubt that a rose picked in one's dream is bound to be found by the side of the pillow upon waking.

The following three chapters are in the same pattern as the one before, describing, through referring to Hogg's letters (though very few sources from the oeuvre), three journeys he made to the highlands during the three years between 1802 and 1804, with the intention to find there a new lease of land as the one in Ettrick would soon expire, which he in the end did. Then the last two chapters respectively give the accounts of Hogg's life after the highland journeys and what has been made of him and the family since his death, mentioning contemporary literary giants such as Alice Munro.

While moments when one reads lines such as "I have heard my own grandfather relate how he had spoken with them" (15) and "[i]f such joy is partly inherited from him [Hogg] then I and his other descendants must give thanks for this" (38), the integrity of the child in aspiring to communicate with the father can be quite mesmerising, a quick glance at the index reveals a certain flaw in such communicativeness. Of the magnum opus, *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* is mentioned eight times, *The Three Perils of Man*, three, *The Three Perils of Woman*, six, yet in all the references there is not a single line drawn from any of the original texts, in whose stead are flashy comments of admiration from Sean Connery or the idea of a film adaptation which never materialised.

It is a sound idea to survey in what manner a poet's living experience can be refracted in his literary output, though it is sometimes difficult to know how closely certain events are related to certain turns and developments of style. On the other hand, a rationale for the selection of passages that leans heavily on those that, like written signposts, would point a clear way for an accomplished journey and a route to be easily followed two centuries later is also sufficient for the basis of a good book and would make an entertaining read. It is only when Gilkison tries to integrate the two paths that statements such as “[h]is travels through these places . . . would inspire and frighten and change him forever” (95) fail to justify themselves and fall into teleological contemplation. It would be hard in most parts for the reader to deduce from what Gilkison chooses to present along the journeys—Hogg's and his own—the ensuing metamorphoses of psyche that would transform Hogg from a minor figure to a name that produces the bulk of the more renowned works and keeps on being read till this very day. There might be, but it is hard to tell from the book, or it would only be comfortably intelligible for those who have already been sufficiently familiar with the body of Hogg's work and have enjoyed them enough to pick up this book and nod in the affirmative whenever there is a line saying how excellent the books are—not only because “even famous people said they liked him” (vii) but that they have actually read them. It serves better as a reminder and, with vigorous humour at places, a fresh diversion, but does not delve into the formative and informative crux.

Another draw of the title anchors at the word, “walking,” but three chapters into the book it turns out that it should be more appropriately “hiking” or “camping.” Reading the ample examples of hymns sung of walking, one would willingly bite the bait and start to contemplate the process of creative walking, with connections to solitude, spontaneity and feelings and expect a proper treatment of it in the pages to follow. But what entices in the preface with the Nietzsche quote, “[a]ll truly great thoughts are conceived by walking” (471) receives no real elaboration whatsoever. Again, the compilation of words from illustrious people is rarely sufficient syllogism.

Perhaps through the interspersed grey boxes of notes which are highly reminiscent of *Wikipedia* items (in fact, there are a few real references from the database) one could easily identify the tone of the book. It aims to inform and delight rather than to critique. At the near end Gilkison writes that “this is not the place for a family history” (139); then what is it? What should one make of

the episode in which he relates how a new-born on the Solomons ended up being his namesake when he talks about hospitality? It is not so much a failed attempt; the journey itself is at least an everlasting, unmistakable joy, but for every flourish of an unrealised idea, a piece of meaning is lost.

Works Cited

- Dyer, Geoff. *Out of Sheer Rage: Wrestling with D. H. Lawrence*. Picador, 2009.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Twilight of the Idols. The Portable Nietzsche*. Translated and edited by Walter Kaufmann, Penguin, 1954.
- Shelley, Percy Bysshe. *Prometheus Unbound: A Lyrical Drama*. Edited by Vida D. Scudder, D. C. Heath, 1892.
- Wordsworth, William. *Lyrical Ballads, with Other Poems*. T. N. Longman & O. Rees, 1800. 2 vols.