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Ruth Barratt-Peacock

Rezension zu Alan Bewell:
Natures in Translation.
Romanticism and Colonial Natural History.

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Vorlage: Ruth Barratt-Peacock

ORCID-Nummer: 0000-0001-5856-1730

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Herausgegeben von Sandra Kerschbaumer, Romy Langeheine und Alexander Pappe

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Rezension zu Alan Bewell:
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Ruth Barratt-Peacock

Alan Bewell's new book is a long over-due critical study on colonial ecology during the Romantic period and the ways in which ecology and poetry intersect. Moving beyond Romantic Nature in the abstract, the volume offers meticulously researched insights into nature as a central agent in the establishment of colonial power and control. This book argues that the period saw a fundamental change in nature: from environments characterised by a fixed location and locus of development to a global network of travelling natures.

Bewell, whose previous research has focussed on British Romanticism, postcolonial theory, and the natural sciences, combines these interests to successfully argue that it was the naturalist who defined how the British understood nature and the colonial world. By structuring the volume around natural history, the author demonstrates how technology, ecology, trade, exploration, slavery, and poetry are interconnected in what became a global system of exchange and control.

The book contains nine chapters which combine aspects of colonial botanic history with an examination of its influence on English Romantic authors. The first five chapters each have a different geographical focus which starts with the English landscape and moves to the Caribbean, Australia, and Southeast America. The final four chapters concentrate on individual authors, works, and people including John Clare's poetic botany, Darwin's development of the theory of evolution (Bewell argues that reading Lyell in a colonial context changed Darwin's thinking from being about "ecologies in place" to "ecologies in motion"), and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. In these final chapters, it is refreshing to find nature being reinserted into Romantic scholarship in an intelligent fashion that understands the complex intersections of biology and culture during the period.

The book's opening chapter explores the economic power behind botanical gardens, as clearing houses for colonial natures and the exotics trade, alongside Erasmus Darwin's poetry which, according to Bewell, clearly presents the idea of a modern cosmopolitan nature characterized by the marketplace and science rather than origin.

It is in the second chapter that the book's primary theoretical focus comes into play. Contrasting Jamaica Kincaid's writings about her experience of nature in the Caribbean with the experience of lieutenant governor's consort Maria Skinner Nugent, Bewell is able to argue that "the genius of hybrid Britain, unlike that of England, was not rooted in place, like a *genius loci*, but instead resided in a *genius translation*" (p. 95). Bewell draws on the concept of translation as a central theory throughout the volume. His use of the term, which originally incorporated the idea of both movement and change, makes it clear that colonial botany was not simply a transfer of plants into new environments, but that this was an all-encompassing process of translation. This is the unifying thread in the book, which is otherwise a tour de force through colonial geography, scientific personalities, and literature.

In chapter three 'Translating Early Australian Natural History', Bewell offers an interesting account of the reception of Indigenous plant names and the appropriation of Indigenous drawings in William Westall's work. Australian colonial poets are noticeably missing from this chapter which instead cites Erasmus Darwin once again. Bewell does, however, offer an interesting perspective on Wordsworth's poetry throughout the volume, arguing that it is not about unchanging nature, but about living with a disappearing nature, in which "*Nature present* is understood as being already a part of *nature past*" (p. 268).

This note of melancholy and sense of loss sets the tone for the second half of the book which inserts an ecocritical perspective into the otherwise slippery authorial voice. Chapter seven for instance, follows the theme of loss from the perspective of John Clare's feelings of exile as industrialisation, agricultural reform, imported plants, and the ever more visible privatisation of landownership exiled him from his rootedness in the landscape of Helpston. The final chapter ties together Charles Darwin, the Romantics, and modern ecological thought in a posthuman interpretation of *Frankenstein* as an "elegy for an unborn species" (p. 339). In a moving take on the classic novel, Bewell closes by reminding the reader of the importance of listening "to the appeals, inherently forms of grievance, silently being made to us by present-day natures and the ghosts of natures past" (p. 340).

The narrative maintains an ironic tone throughout which is humorous and entertaining to read. It is however, also plastic enough that the reader is put in the uncomfortable position of being called on to admire the sheer ingenuity of the British empire. This is an effective technique for unsettling the reader and truly communicating the *Zeitgeist* of his subject. One of the side effects of reading the dual history of colonisation and Romanticism through the lens of natural history, as Bewell does here, is that plants take on an almost sentient aspect and are afforded a great deal of agency in the book. This leads to fresh and playful prose which can however, also create a sense of erasure in the author's treatment of indigenous cultures. Bewell does not address Aboriginal nations' involvement in pre-colonial trade and biological exchange in Southeast Asia for instance. However, such omissions do not invalidate his arguments. The approach to the biological history of colonisation during the Romantic period taken in this book builds on Paul Carter's work on spatial history in postcolonial studies. Bewell's primary contribution lies in the recontextualization of classic English Romantic poetry in the realities of a globalised network of biological exchange and the effect that this has had on how nature is written.

Natures in Translation is an excellent example of how interdisciplinary scholarship can revolutionise our understanding of a subject. The text speaks to contemporary concerns without resorting to clumsy comparisons or platitudes. The image of nature so commonly propagated in the context of Romanticism is one of nostalgia, escapism, and the sublime. Bewell's book dispels this image by systematically drawing a picture of nature at the forefront of cutting-edge science, modernity, trade, and power. His natures are not stable places of quiet retreat and touchstones of moral renewal, but dynamic, travelling, and translated natures on a global scale. Scholars of Romantic literature, the history of science, and those with an interest in ecocriticism will find this book to be a great enrichment to their understanding of both the Romantic period and current ecological realities.