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Morgan Rooney. *The French Revolution Debate and the British Novel, 1790–1814: The Struggle for History’s Authority*. Lewisburg, Penn.: Bucknell University Press, 2013. viii + 223 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$85.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-1-61148-476-2. \$84.99 U.S. (eb). ISBN 978-1-61148-477-9.

Review by Marilyn Morris, University of North Texas.

The tri- and bicentenaries of England’s Revolution of 1688 and France’s Revolution of 1789 reinvigorated interest in these momentous events and the relations between them. The reputations of British Jacobin and anti-Jacobin novels, long overshadowed by Romantic and Victorian literature, benefitted the most as literary critics have continued to draw our attention to the significance of these works to history and to the development of fictional genres. Morgan Rooney joins the chorus against Georg Lukács’s *The Historical Novel* (1937), which dismissed historical fiction written before Sir Walter Scott’s *Waverley* (1814) as unworthy of notice. He argues that Lukács’s narrow progressivist view of history prevented him from noticing the important debate over the past’s relevance to the present conducted in the novels of the 1790s, which Scott resolved in *Waverley*.

According to Rooney, the struggle over history’s authority originated in the controversy sparked by Rev. Richard Price’s November 1789 sermon to the London Revolution Society declaring that the French revolutionaries proceeded on the same principles as those who effected the Glorious Revolution of 1688—principles not fully realized in England as evinced by the failure to repeal the Test and Corporation Acts and to establish equality of parliamentary representation. In his famous reply, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Edmund Burke cast Price and the French revolutionaries as the heirs not of the Whigs of 1688 but of the regicides of the 1640s and 1650s Civil War and Interregnum. Burke also rejected Price’s teleological conception of history as a steady process of enlightenment. He saw past events as discrete entities requiring interpretation on their own terms as ancestral inheritances, much like an entailed estate needed gentlemanly stewardship to guarantee its benefits to future generations. Rooney quotes the defense of Price’s interpretation of 1688 that James Mackintosh offered in *Vindiciae Gallicae* (1791), which, in stressing the roles of imagination, translation, and reason in engaging the past, foreshadowed the workings of history in that decade’s novels.

Rooney details the ways the contending approaches to the past became a feature of the ensuing pamphlet war. Burke’s emphasis on the value of opinions and manners, which writers of the Scottish Enlightenment had shown to be compatible with modern commerce, combined nevertheless with his lament on chivalry’s demise to provoke rival interpretations of the Gothic bequest. Thomas Paine, Mary Wollstonecraft, and William Godwin each presented England’s history as a chronicle of barbarity, injustice, and oppression that would in time be overturned by the progress of reason. Mackintosh dated the commencement of Enlightenment specifically to 1688. Contrary to Burke’s characterization of such ideas coming from the French Enlightenment, which, indeed, they resembled, this model of history developed independently in the thought of English Rational Dissent, with its millennial vision transforming into a secular utopia borne of freedom, reason, justice, and rights. Reformers challenged Burke’s inheritance model of history by fixing on the printing press “as a force that brings out progress through a series of successive ruptures and displacements in human knowledge” (p. 59). Rooney contends that the reformers’ notion of historical change via discussion and debate facilitated by the press

did not present a viable alternative. Moreover, the attempts they made to overturn Burke's model ironically helped establish its centrality.

Anti-Jacobin novels burlesqued Godwin's "new philosophy" by having their characters take his ideas to absurd lengths. Rooney's readings of George Walker's *The Vagabond* (1799), Jane West's *A Tale of the Times* (1799), and Robert Bisset's *Douglas; or, The Highlander* (1800) gives these works more dignity as supporters of Burkean notions of inheritance. They each displayed innovation in their approaches. Walker had the Gordon Riots stand in for the French Revolution and a dystrophic American West represent the reality of radical utopian visions. West used a Wollstonecraft figure to demonstrate French radicalism's threat to marriage and procreation. Bisset placed an estate in peril to highlight the dangers of attacking Britain's hierarchical order. Meanwhile, the so-called British Jacobin writers had seen their utopian view of history's progress dashed by the escalating violence in France. To sustain their progressive ideals, Rooney argues, they focused on rejecting aspects of the past that continued to have deleterious effects on society and politics. Characters in Charlotte Smith's *The Young Philosopher* (1798), Godwin's *St. Leon* (1799), and Maria Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent* (1800) fought against an antiquated past's stranglehold on the present. The political ambiguity that Rooney and other critics have found in *Castle Rackrent* does not seem surprising when viewed in the context of the broader Burke-Paine controversy. Few opponents of Paine were solidly in favor of Burke, and vice versa.

Finally, Rooney turns to historical fiction written after the demise of the Jacobin and anti-Jacobin novel: Jane Porter's *Thaddeus of Warsaw* (1803) and *The Scottish Chiefs* (1810) and Sydney Owenson's *The Wild Irish Girl* (1806). These novels were less overtly partisan and "the opposing understandings of historical process so characteristic of the 1790s—history as accretion and continuity or history as rupture and displacement—merge to give expression to a more complex and, ultimately, compelling engagement with the past that accords each a valid but nonexclusive place in a newly complicated conception of historical development" (pp. 132-33). *Waverly* at last transcended ideology to achieve a representation of the past both elegiac and affirming of progress.

In addition to scholars of the novel, those interested in the French Revolution's impact on Britain and on the uses and abuses of history in political argument will find food for thought in Rooney's study.

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