

Ossianism and the Arthurian Revival: The Case of Richard Hole's *Arthur; or the Northern Enchantment* (1789)

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In 1833, Samuel Taylor Coleridge was moved to observe that there would never be an English epic poem on the subject of King Arthur:

As to Arthur, you could not by any means make a poem on him national to Englishmen. What have *we* to do with him?¹

Coleridge made this prediction some 26 years before the publication of the first four poems of Alfred Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, the cycle of poems that completed a nearly one thousand year process whereby King Arthur became a national figure for Englishmen. For much of the twentieth century the scale of Tennyson's achievement made it difficult to conceive of the Arthurian revival in anything other than Tennysonian terms: the success, value or significance of any given text was established in relation to the extent to which it fitted the yet to be formed but retrospectively applied Tennysonian blueprint. And that blueprint was overwhelmingly English both in terms of the person of Arthur and what was to be understood as the great source of Medieval Arthurian literature, Thomas Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*. A powerful combination of what we (if not Coleridge) understand as Arthur's historic place within an Anglo-Norman 'ideology of a pan-British suzerainty' and his role as 'the Celtic keystone in the architecture of British monarchical identity' combined with the *terminus ad quem* represented by Tennyson meant that for critics such as James Merriman, depictions of Arthur that fell outside of this Anglo-centric tradition were historical blind alleys, absurd experiments in a misty Celtic pre-Romanticism.²

1 S. T. Coleridge, 'Table Talk', 4 September 1833; in *Coleridge's Miscellaneous Criticism*, edited by Thomas Middleton Rayer (London: Constable, 1936), p. 429.

2 Murray G. H. Pittock, *Celtic Identity and the British Image* (Manchester University Press, 1999), pp. 16, 19. See for example, James Merriman, *The Flower of Kings: A Study of the Arthurian Legend in England between 1485 and 1835* (Lawrence: University of Kansas, 1973).

However in the last twenty years an increased emphasis has been placed on the ways in which Tennyson's unprecedentedly English Arthur emerged from a number of different Arthurs at the opening of the nineteenth century. In doing so not only has a lost tradition of Arthurian writing been uncovered, but it has also been possible to recover a sense of what Coleridge meant in denying the relevance to Englishmen of the Arthurian story.³ In this chapter I want to examine one early but significant version of King Arthur written in the generation before Coleridge, Richard Hole's *Arthur or the Northern Enchantment*, a seven book 'poetical romance' published in 1789.

Hole (1746–1803) was an East Devon clergyman who, with the exception of his time as a student at Oxford, spent all of his life in Exeter and its surrounding area. Although he was active in writing for the literary society that met in Exeter through the 1790s, his writings are relatively few and scattered: a series of odes published together in *Poems, Chiefly by Gentlemen of Devonshire and Cornwall* (1792); a couple of poems and some essays (the majority on Shakespeare) in *Essays by a Society of Gentlemen at Exeter* (1796); a translation of the *Homeric Hymn to Ceres* (1781); some essays for the London periodical press; a versification of Macpherson's *Fingal* (published anonymously in 1772); and *Arthur*. A number of works were published in whole or part after his death, as was a memoir by his Exeter friend Bartholomew Parr.

Though responsible for only a slight body of published work, Hole had some reputation. His translation of *Fingal* ranks as one of the more accomplished and well known of the many versions of *Ossian* produced in the 50 years after its appearance—it was for example spotted on a bookshelf of Mr Maclean of Drimnan by Thomas Hill on his Ossianic investigation of the Highlands in 1780.⁴ Hole's most recent biographer has cited the opinion of Byron that Hole was a poet of 'faded reputation' though this is perhaps more significant in suggesting that there was at one time a reputation to fade, and the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* notes that *Arthur* was widely if not always positively reviewed by amongst others Egerton Brydges, Nathan Drake and

3 See Roger Simpson, *Camelot Regained: The Arthurian Revival and Tennyson 1800–1849* (Cambridge: Brewer, 1990) and Stephanie L Barczewski, *Myth and National Identity in Nineteenth-Century Britain: The Legends of King Arthur and Robin Hood* (Oxford University Press, 2000).

4 See Thomas F. Hill, 'Interesting Light on the Ossian Controversy', *The Gentleman's Magazine* 52 (December 1782), pp. 570–571 and 53 (August 1783), pp. 662–665, reprinted in *Ossian and Ossianism*, ed. Dafydd Moore, 4 vols, (London, 2004), vol. 3, p. 327. Given this, it is ironic that the Library Society in Exeter, of which Hole was a member, could not manage to purchase a copy itself.