

# Nature on the Move

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## NATURE ON THE MOVE

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*Natures in Translation:  
Romanticism and Colonial  
Natural History* by Alan Bewell.  
Baltimore: Johns Hopkins  
University Press, 2017. Pp. 393.  
\$60.00 cloth.

As Alan Bewell says in the beginning of his rich and meticulous new book, “The centrality of nature during the Romantic period is obvious, but surely modern readers have some right to complain that enough has been said and written about it” (2–3). There is indeed a high bar for critics seeking to add to our understanding of Romantic interests in the natural world; the problems are large and multiple, and have thus attracted more than a century’s worth of critical commentary. Surely there is nothing new under the sun on this topic. Romantic conceptions of nature have profoundly affected modernity but are also rooted in specific historical and cultural moments, already far enough in the past that they require ever more concerted efforts of historicism to add nuance and insight. Even the debates initiated by New Historicism’s dismissal of the centrality of nature to Romanticism, and the various rebuttals by ecocritics and others, are themselves now old news. The dust has settled. Both are right. Nature matters, and so does culture, and we know what there is to know.

Moreover, “nature” is itself now a very tired word, one that we might do well to banish from our collective vocabularies, along with “reality,” “art,” and perhaps “discourse.” We don’t really know what we mean when we use the word, and even less when others use it. These

words are weak stand-ins for something broad and vague and abstract and wearying. Nature is the world, physical (Wordsworth's "rocks and stones and trees") and vaguely spiritual (Coleridge's "one Life within us and abroad"). Moreover, it's difficult to know, in the face of the impending catastrophes of climate change, mass extinctions, and the erasure of habitat, why or how the study of Romanticism and its varying understandings of the natural world might still matter. This is especially true if, as Bewell also notes, "nature," however we understand it, matters less to most of us than it used to. We are "post-nature"; we consume it, but we don't collectively care to understand or preserve it, and it's not very clear in any case how literary criticism of any kind can intervene to make us care. The good news is that Bewell rises to all of these challenges. His previous work has been scrupulously interdisciplinary and factual, exploring complex intersections of cultural, environmental, medical, and other kinds of history with literary texts. This latest book is his best yet—the broadest and most theoretical, the most ambitious and field-altering, and also the most inspiring for those seeking new and exciting ways of thinking not just about the natural world and Romanticism, but also about how we might turn our critical and scholarly insights into ways of thinking about the world as it

exists around us in the here and now.

Bewell's argument seems at first quite simple: that while "we talk as if there were only one nature," there are in fact

a plurality of natures . . . : that the natural world in its general meaning is composed of many natures that are materially, historically, and culturally distinct from one another, that these natures can succeed or evolve in relation to each other across time and space, and that a given environment can be composed, like a society, of many different and often competing natures, reflecting different social relationships and values. (12–13)

Bewell is interested in a genealogy of natures, not in the abstract, but as revealed through cultural records. A nature is not just a community or set of organisms bounded geographically to a specific landscape but as understood, lived in, explored, colonized, protected, or destroyed by people, who are also a part of the world. "Politics, in other words, are embedded in natures, and natures embedded in politics, behaviors, and ideas" (13). More interestingly, modernity itself involves a growing awareness of the nature of natures, both through the advancement of science, and through our other

attempts at representing and understanding the places we explore and inhabit. More specifically, Bewell is interested in how our ideas of nature and the actual world are in competition or conflict. He focuses especially on how acts of colonization and resistance to it depend upon “translating natures,” which means regarding the biota of a place as indigenous, and as capable of being dramatically altered, both on the ground (through agriculture, for instance) and less materially through forms of representation. Bewell is thus a cultural environmental historian, or an environmental cultural historian, carefully analyzing historical documents about the new world and the old (travelogues, natural histories, poems, paintings, novels) for evidence of tensions or contradictions between our ideas about places and the places themselves. He looks also for tensions between what actually existed in a place and how it was represented, between what was there and how it was unwittingly or deliberately altered, and between nostalgia and the relentless desire to “improve” and dominate and mobilize.

Bewell is very good at reading these tensions, that both nature and our understandings of them are filled with conflict. In this sense, Bewell’s work is deconstructive, revealing instability and slippages in cultural understandings of the natural world, as well as revealing what is at stake in various attempts

to repress or reveal these erasures. On the other hand, he is not so much interested in a large framing theory of natures in conflict as he is a careful sifter of the evidence. He reads mostly from the ground up, although occasionally his assertions about the significance of these siftings rise too far above the evidence. For much of the book (although not consistently), he is concerned with ideas of translations of natures, especially how the European Enlightenment practices of writing of natural history are “translations, as they seek to carry . . . local natures and indigenous understandings of them to a scientifically and commercially oriented European audience . . . a monolingual understanding of world natures” (47). Bewell’s account does more than simply insist that European nature writers imposed their own Enlightenment understanding of nature on the foreign lands they explored. He is interested too in how these natural histories helped to enable imperialism’s refashioning of nature, allowing the British and others to know what was new and valuable the world over. This in turn facilitated various interventions and re-makings of landscapes and ecosystems via the deliberate and accidental transport of plants and animals, as well as, surprisingly, informing and enriching the understandings of the natures of Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Clare.

The first five of the book's nine chapters focus on texts of natural history and travel writing, examining poems by Erasmus Darwin, travelogues by William Bligh and James Cook, natural histories by William Bartram, Joseph Banks, and Gilbert White. Most of these texts clearly do the work of translating nature worlds (largely Caribbean and Australian) that Bewell sets out to explore: fueling the "dream of using botanical knowledge to transform an alien landscape into a world-class nature, global in every sense" (124), and thereby greasing the wheels of commerce, power, and imperial conquest. These texts and the actions they enabled generally ran roughshod over indigenous cultures and ecosystems, but they also reveal genuine fascination with plants and animals, their strangeness and familiarity, and how they help to define their own identities as humans, animals, locals, and foreigners. Bewell is generally sympathetic to all of his texts, showing that even as they abet damage to the worlds they are exploring, they also show varying degrees of openness to the wonder of the world, fellow feeling towards other creatures and cultures.

It is a sad and somewhat unacknowledged irony of Bewell's book that while indigenous natures and cultures are in a way at the very center of his argument, the original natures that are lost in translation,

they are represented only very indirectly via the work of British writers like Gilbert White and William Bartram, John Clare, William Wordsworth, and Mary Shelley (which more or less occupies the second half of the book). For example, he argues that "Clare's poetry can also give us a better understanding of what it might have meant to native and indigenous peoples in other parts of the world who were also grappling with the catastrophic loss of their own local natures and the ways of life which they sustained" (273), a claim that seems simultaneously deeply problematic and nonetheless worth thinking about. Of course, it is very nearly impossible for literary scholars to address or reveal the original natures of indigenous cultures, but Bewell might have done more to acknowledge this silence as a fact and a problem. However, Bewell's readings are smart and worthy, not so much entirely fresh as creating meaning by viewing familiar texts in broader and more significant contexts; revealing especially how these writers show an awareness of what is at stake in an awareness of the deeply local, the deeply felt, and the deeply familiar. Bewell's readings of Clare's poetry and Shelley's *Frankenstein*, although quite brief, offer many original insights. For Bewell, Clare's commitment to a specific place in a specific time, his sense that this nature is or ought to have been stable (a lovely illusion),

transforms his poetry into a kind of ghost writing, providing traces of a cultural ecosystem that was already gone by the time Clare began to document it. Bewell's account of *Frankenstein* is a little more startling, and serves, somewhat puzzlingly, as the book's conclusion. He makes the provocative case that the novel is about "the appearance and destruction of an absolutely new species of being." The creature, he argues, "whose patchwork body chronicles its heterogeneous ancestry, is a thoroughly modern being, lacking a fixed species form, without a biological lineage, and unable to claim an identity bound up with time or place" (327). The monster is an emblem and vision of the nature modernity has created, in other words, one that is uprooted and hybrid, one that perfectly foreshadows our own nature.

One of the great pleasures and strengths of this book is that it is very well written while also being sophisticated and scholarly. Bewell carefully notes his agreements with and reliance upon other scholars, and where disagreements are sharp or only a matter of emphasis, but his interest lies firmly with his primary texts and the complex interactions with the physical and cultural worlds they represent. While he is occasionally repetitive, his writing is jargon-free. My one quibble has to do with his organization of the chapters: in general, Bewell's

discussion of texts moves from the non-canonical and non-literary to the canonical and the literary. That is, he examines how the natural world is documented in texts that have science and travel as paramount concerns (including Erasmus Darwin's scientific poems), and then moves on to texts more central to Romanticism's literary canon. The one exception here is the writing and thought of Charles Darwin. Bewell's fascinating chapter on him is reserved for the book's penultimate chapter. It is in a sense the climax to the argument that nature is mobile and unstable, showing that Darwin's theory of evolution both rises out of and helps to explain the deeper forces that drive colonization. These revelations are central and exciting, and so would have been more helpful if presented near the beginning of his book. But this is a small matter, especially since we all increasingly tend to read by dipping in and out of larger texts. All in all, Bewell's *Natures in Translation* not only gives an excellent summary of the role the natural world has played in Romantic period writing across a range of genres but also charts the way to many new worlds of scholarship.

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