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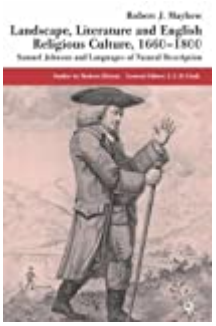

Robert J. Mayhew. *Landscape, Literature, and English Religious Culture, 1660-1800: Samuel Johnson and Languages of Natural Description.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. vi + 426pp. $85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-333-99308-8.

Reviewed by William Gibson (Oxford Brookes University)

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Robert Mayhew, who teaches at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth and is best known for his 2000 book *Enlightenment Geography: The Political Languages of British Geography, 1650-1850* (also published by Palgrave Macmillan), has already established a strong case for the existence of Whig and Tory interpretations of landscape and geography. In this new book, Mayhew goes further in arguing that religion provided the principal framework and language for landscape descriptions. Mayhew subordinates class and economics to religion and thus establishes his credentials as a follower of Jonathan Clark. The validity of religious interpretations of landscape is neither new, nor radical, but Mayhew goes further in claiming that it is possible to detect theological differences in landscape descriptions. The core principles of these differences are those that affected the Church of England in the period after 1688; thus, argues Mayhew, there were Low and High Church descriptions of landscape. Latitudinarian descriptions predominated–Low Churchmen were, asserts Mayhew, "quantitatively more important" (p. 317)–but Samuel Johnson, though unrepresentative, employed a High Church language of landscape. It is part of Mayhew's argument that Low Church landscape descriptions were ultimately derived from the Latitudinarian commitment to reason and rationalism. The Newtonian revolution, suggests Mayhew, made Low Church writers think of nature and landscape in terms of physics and natural laws. High Churchmen, in contrast, wrote of landscape in terms of revelation and scripture, and limited the rational ways in which they thought of it. In this, and in atomizing the language of landscape, particularly Johnson's, Mayhew's book is a useful and stimulating study. He also endorses the current religious historiography by avoiding the suggestion that rational Latitudinarian landscape descriptions were an aesthetic of secularization. It was, rather, a true theological language.

In turning to Samuel Johnson, Mayhew uses his *Dictionary* to derive important insights into Johnson's views of nature as evidence of the existence of God. He also effectively analyzes Johnson's various forms of writing (*The Rambler*, homiletics, poetry, biography and journals) in providing different facets within which Johnson developed a moral and theological language of landscape. Johnson's "Tory" and High Church view of landscape was, claims Mayhew, derived from a succession of writers including Richard Hooker, Robert South, and William Law. Johnson also developed an "empirical" view of landscape which was experienced and communicated through travelers such as Jonas Hanway and Johnson's own journeys. Travel could be both "modern" and "historical" with an emphasis on progress and development but also operating within a clear antiquarian con-

text that emphasized continuity with the past: "In this Johnson was part of the English Enlightenment which saw little conflict between science and religion" (p. 261).

There are some problems with this analysis of landscape language however. One of these is Mayhew's unrefined view of the High and Low Church divisions. Mayhew argues that the principal aim of Latitudinarianism was to avoid the factionalism of the seventeenth century. While this was a feature of Low Churchmanship, it was hardly the principal motivation; far more significant was the desire for reunion of the Church and Dissent. Mayhew also over-states the Latitudinarian debt to reason–forgetting perhaps that Newton was as much concerned with mysticism as with reason. Low Churchmanship was also emphatic in its stress on sincerity and independence of judgment and on *sola scriptura*. Similarly Mayhew's linking of William Gilpin with Anna Radcliffe connects Latitudinarianism with the Gothic in a way that seems implausible. The Gothic/Romantic debt to reason and Low Churchmanship seems far less than its origins in the Medieval, mystical, and revelatory succession of High Churchmanship. If Mayhew had sought a more representative writer to connect with William Gilpin he could have considered Mark Akenside, whose poem, "The Pleasures of the Imagination," seems to lie behind much of the writing on landscape description. A further reservation is that increasingly ecclesiastical historians of the eighteenth century are questioning the division into Low Church and High Church. The idea of a brittle and impermeable divide seems increasingly untenable and is being challenged by historians. There were many Low Churchmen who placed a strong emphasis on the Eucharist and its mystery; and plenty of High Churchmen held that reason and rationalism were important. Thus the very foundation of the divide on which Mayhew's work is predicated may be perilous.

It would be negligent of a reviewer not to identify one of the book's most significant flaws. It is dreadfully over-written–ironic for a book featuring Dr. Johnson. Even the simplest of ideas are communicated in such a tortuous way that it is not clear whether Mayhew is seeking to impress himself or his readers. Take for example the simple idea clothed in the following: "Emergent from the previous discussion of socio-economic and symbolic contextualisation is the suggestion that there exists an epistemological space wherein to accept the specificity of landscape studies as its own discourse" (p. 26). Or even "Johnson's Dictionary is a liminal document with a complex interaction of the compiler and his authorities which makes the post-structural problem about the existence of authorial intention particularly apparent" (p. 154). One page (p. 309) is almost a parody of academic writing. It is difficult to avoid the suspicion that writers bury their ideas so deeply in ornate language because they are diffident about the validity of the adage that the most complex ideas are expressed simply.

Despite these two major concerns, Mayhew is correct in advancing the view that "landscape ideas reflected the presuppositions which drove intellectual life more generally, which in the eighteenth century were based on the twin pillars of classicism and Christianity" (p. 317), and justifies the detailed analysis it receives.

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