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REVIEWS

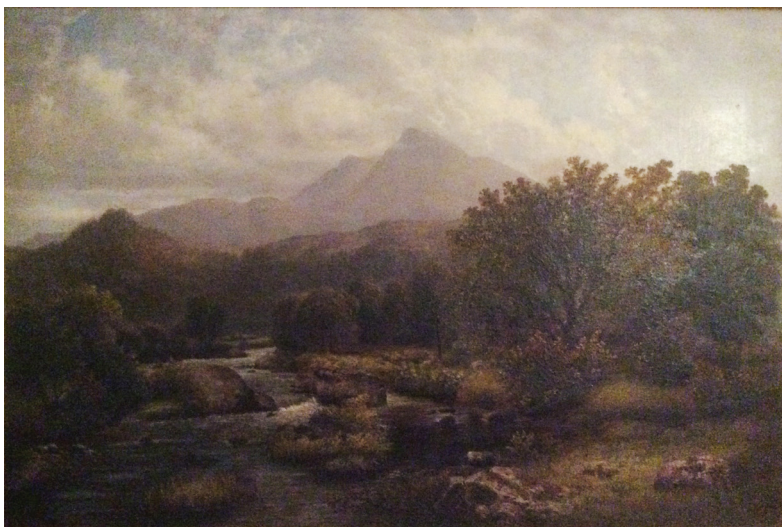
Peter Lord, *Looking Out: Welsh painting, social class and international context* (Cardigan: Parthian, 2020). Pp. 304. £40.00.



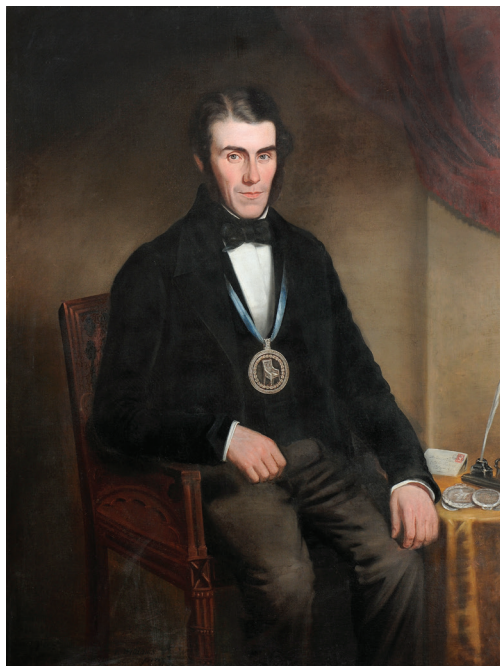
Looking Out is a book that spends curiously little time looking out. Despite its title, this book by Peter Lord, the celebrated historian of Welsh visual culture, remains circumscribed by a national frame of reference and tethered to a nationalist historiography. Given Lord's career-long and hugely important historiographic mission to recuperate and recentre the Welsh visual tradition, this is no surprise, and nationalist critics will find this no flaw. Read as a continuation of Lord's earlier surveys of the *Visual Culture of Wales* (2000–4) and *The Tradition: A New History of Welsh Art* (2016), *Looking Out* testifies to Lord's impressive success in overcoming formidable obstacles to rediscover and reinterpret the neglected and often-denigrated

evidence of centuries of visual culture in Wales. However, given its self-selected remit, and despite its many virtues, *Looking Out* represents a missed opportunity to look out, across the physical and conceptual borders of Wales, to perceive their permeability, and Wales's profound interconnectedness with other places and other cultures, as well as the transformative ways of practising art history which allow those connections and their consequences to come to light.

In the first chapter, 'Evan Williams and Nonconformist Vision', Lord investigates the ministerial portraits, landscapes and theoretical writings of Calvinistic Methodist minister and artist Evan Williams (1815–78). Lord interprets Williams's photographic and formulaic portraits as 'the most developed visual expression of the aspirations of the literary [ministerial] *cofiant*' (43), a genre 'confined by formulaic recitations of piety and service' (16) and used as an instrument 'of social regulation deployed by a recently empowered [Nonconformist] theocracy at the height of its power' (41) in late nineteenth-century Wales. The broader historiographical argument is that these portraits have been unduly downgraded in favour of Williams's landscapes, which Lord personally finds 'unremarkable' (45). Yet – as Lord elucidates via an effective reading of Williams's 'four essays on aesthetics and the history of art', published between 1848 and 1867 and 'the first attempt ever made to present the subject in depth through the medium of the Welsh language' (35) – these landscapes were similarly informed by the values and concepts of Welsh Nonconformity and the nationalist discourses provoked by the slanders of the Blue Books. Like many of his contemporaries, Williams saw Wales as morally superior but culturally deficient with respect to England, and so set out to develop a theory of beauty which could inspire Welsh painters to build on the former while remedying the latter. Thus, as Lord informs us, he reinterpreted Plato's theory of ideal forms through the lens of his Calvinistic Methodist faith in order to elucidate a theory of landscape painting wherein the artist aimed to facilitate contemplation of the perfect rationality of God's creation via transcribing nature's beauty, while at the same time infusing 'some spiritual element that went beyond mere repetition' (38) such that the finished work would generate an enjoyable, elevating and revelatory experience for viewers.



Evan Williams, *Moel Siabod from Afon Llugwy, near Tŷ Hyll*



Evan Williams, *Ebenezer Thomas, Eben Fardd*

The salient difference, for Lord, between Williams's landscapes and portraits is a matter of cultural purity and authenticity.¹ Lord condemns Williams's aesthetic theory, and the landscapes he produced based upon it, because it looked out to ideas and writers ('from Plato and Plutarch to Reynolds and Ruskin', 44–5) that were read elsewhere, in London and Paris. His creative adaptation and cultural-linguistic translation of these ideas is not enough to erase the stain of their foreignness. In contrast, 'it is the very fact that his [Williams's] portrait paintings stand apart' from non-Welsh cultural influences 'that is to be celebrated' (46). Culturally pure, Williams's portraits are also more authentic. For Lord, the necessity of a theory is a token of inauthenticity, whereas the fact that 'Williams wrote nothing about the theory of portrait painting' (46) signals that his portraits were spontaneous, 'unconscious' expressions of the 'aesthetic' of a 'common artisan tradition' in which he was 'so deeply rooted [...] as to be self-evident to him' (46). Framed initially in terms of class, Lord's subsequent argument for the contemporary relevance of Williams's portraits reveals the nationalist parameters of his claim to authenticity. For Lord, Williams's ministerial portraits should be 'honour[ed]' (46) as a link to 'the people that we were' (47). The pathos of this claim, of course, rests on a mythos of national essence, a shared identity linking an exclusive 'we' in the present and a 'we' in the past that persists through comprehensive historical and cultural change (Lord acknowledges that the worldview these portraits record is today 'problematic', 46). This position is symptomatic of the book as a whole, for which the Welsh nation forms an enduring container for both the discrete historical episodes investigated and for (some) contemporary readers, belying efforts at historicisation. Thus, hidden behind valid historiographical claims about the dubious universality of the modernist metanarrative and the marginalisation of myriad cultures by Anglo- and Franco-centric systems of value, are exactly the same kinds of nationalist concepts and arguments that led to English and French art being assigned universal value in the first place.²

In the second chapter, Lord recounts the careers of three itinerant artisan painters active in nineteenth-century Wales: Albin Robert Burt (1783–1842), William Jones Chapman (c.1808/11–c.1880) and John Cambrian Rowland (1818–90). Beyond a single paragraph identifying a stylistic resemblance between William Jones Chapman and American painter Sheldon Peck, Lord's focus remains squarely within Wales. To

fulfil the claim made on the flap that this and the other 'essays [in the volume] discuss the concerns of Welsh painters not only in domestic terms but also in the context of the ways in which artists in other parts of Europe and in the United States reacted to the common underlying causes of those concerns', a methodology more fundamentally comparative, or transnational, would have been more successful.³

The third chapter is more successful in interweaving an 'international context' into the account of Welsh painting. Lord follows Edgar Herbert Thomas's (1862–1936) emergence at the 1883 National Eisteddfod held in Cardiff, appropriation by competing factions within the Cardiff nationalist intelligentsia, training in London then Antwerp in 1884, return to Wales in 1888 and subsequent artistic career, which was punctuated by four months of confinement in Bridgend Lunatic Asylum in 1892. Lord tantalisingly hints at the Académie Royale des Beaux-Arts in Antwerp as a space of cosmopolitan mixing and cultural exchange between the English, Welsh, Dutch and Belgian students, and as a vector of Thomas's exposure to 'avant-garde tendencies' (111), including Symbolism. However, the monographic approach taken means that a paucity of documentary evidence specifically about Thomas arrests this line of enquiry. Nevertheless, Lord proposes (more or less speculatively but nevertheless convincingly) continental sources for Thomas's large allegorical works, figure studies, sketches of the Glamorgan Canal and flower paintings in the form of Théodore Géricault, Odilon Redon and Fernand Khnopff. Most compellingly, via a close reading of the essays of Thomas Matthews – 'the most important Welsh-language critic of contemporary art' (127) – and the pictures and ideas of G. F. Watts – the English Symbolist claimed by ethnic Welsh nationalists on the basis of his ancestry – Lord unravels how the pan-European current of Symbolism was culturally translated and instrumentalised for the Romantic nationalist discourse that dominated Welsh cultural politics at the turn of the century. Infused with Celtic mysticism, Thomas's treatment of light and colour was seen to eschew materialism and objectivity in favour of spiritual transcendence. Yet, Lord paints Thomas as a victim of such instrumentalisation: the declining salience of Romantic nationalism, and 'a change in the artistic weather beyond Wales' (136) favouring the modernism of Augustus John, saw Thomas all but vanish from the Welsh public sphere in the 1920s until his death. Lord's emphasis on the prosaic and political determinants of artistic success, as well as the concrete vectors of cross-cultural exchange (here

art schools, however briefly sketched) excitingly situates Welsh culture in a wider context without erasing the specificity of Welsh engagements with transnational currents.

In the fourth chapter – on the medieval fantasies of Thomas Evelyn Scott-Ellis, 8th Baron Howard de Walden – however, Lord reverts to the problematic search for authenticity that marred his interpretation of Evan Williams. For Lord, Howard de Walden, who belonged properly to the ‘English or anglophile elite’ (174), used Celtic medieval historicism as a literal and figurative dress-up box, finding various costumes through which to live ‘in a fantasy Wales to alleviate his deep need for a sense of belonging’ (192) born of a ‘sad and isolated childhood’ (145). Howard de Walden’s patronage of Welsh artists Augustus John and J. D. Innes, the Australian landscapist Derwent Lees, English painter Philip Wilson Steer and Anglo-Scot Ambrose McEvoy – which included funding and facilitating painting expeditions in Wales and beyond, including driving Innes through Andalusia – is interpreted through the lens of this inauthenticity. Thus, it feels inevitable that the outward looking and transnationally mobile artists in de Walden’s circle should be seen to fail to paint authentic Welsh landscapes.

Also in this chapter, Lord discusses the multinational artistic community in Harlech, which included, *inter alia*, the Anglo-Irish poet Alfred Perceval Graves; George Davison, English Pictorialist photographer and founder of the Linked Ring; American Pictorialist then Vorticist photographer Alvin Langdon Coburn; Scottish and English painters Mabel Pryde and William Nicholson, along with their children Ben and Nancy Nicholson; and the English dancer Margaret Morris, often accompanied by Scottish painter John Duncan Fergusson. From another perspective, this community might have been interpreted through the international context of modernist artist colonies and via an engagement with the latest scholarship on transnational modernisms, including vitally important work on the modernities and modernisms in and of colonised cultures.⁴ However, the identification of Morris and Fergusson’s ‘interest in non-European cultural expression’ (187) serves as the prelude to a condemnation of ‘the art activity at Harlech’ on the basis of its ‘remoteness from the realities of Wales’ (190). The point is not that Lord’s critique of colonialist attitudes towards Wales is ill-founded – quite the opposite – but rather that the nationalist framework grounding the critique is

out of step with *Looking Out*'s ostensible remit, and forecloses the kind of positive scholarly attention to transnational mobility, transcultural exchange and international cosmopolitanism that has so invigorated recent histories of nineteenth- and twentieth-century modernities and modernisms. It is equally telling on this score that in chapter five, on the illustrations and murals of M. E. Eldridge, that the internationalist modernist 56 Group should be criticised for 'imitating metropolitan practice' (239), that is for being inauthentically and impurely Welsh, ironically inverting the weaponised concept of imitation that, as Partha Mitter has argued, has been a critical tool by which colonialist art histories have so effectively marginalised art produced in colonised spaces.⁵

The book's final chapter gallops through episodes in the painting of the Welsh landscape and its inhabitants between 1850 and 1950, focusing on the Betws-y-Coed artists David Cox and Clarence Whaite; Evan Walters, Archie Rhys Griffiths and Vincent Evans in the context of the Franco-Belgian Social Realism imported by Thomas Jones, editor of *The Welsh Outlook*; and Josef Herman who, born in Poland to a Jewish family, painted the coal miners around Ystradgynlais after settling there in 1944.



Augustus John, *The Estuary of Mawddach*



Josef Herman, *The Welsh Miner*

As in chapter three, the ‘international context’ figures more prominently here, although the logic of the argumentation is nevertheless strained in places. In the section on Herman, Lord recounts an anecdote wherein Herman castigated German artist Martin Bloch, who was visiting him in Ystradgynlais, for focusing on his visual impression of the Welsh landscape at the expense of its underlying social and philosophical significance (‘Doesn’t he know the meaning of a tip?’ 287). Reprising his earlier invective against Augustus John’s ‘beautiful but disingenuous re-hash of Wild Wales’ (288), Lord aligns himself squarely with Herman; Bloch’s enjoyment of the ‘hot afternoon in Ystradgynlais as a sensual experience’ is seen to reveal his outsidership (289). Yet, Herman’s primitivisation of the coal miners

who created the tip apparently misunderstood by Bloch, hated by those very miners when exhibited in 1948 (a mark of success on its own terms, per Lord), is surely no less abstracting and instrumentalising than Bloch's. The logic by which John and Bloch can be excoriated for eliding the social reality of Welsh mining life in pursuit of a particular aesthetic philosophy, but Herman can be praised for eliding the social reality of Welsh mining life ('The miner has thus become, for me, both incidental and symbolical', as Herman put it, 290) in pursuit of another aesthetic philosophy, is difficult for this reader to follow.

Looking Out ends with an encomium to 'insiderness', and the transparent authenticity it can produce (Evan Williams's portraits are the high watermark). While 'outsiderness' is not *a priori* invalidating, Lord concedes, and 'the issues are not to be conceived in terms of straightforward dichotomies between insider and outsider' (296), the art of outsiders and 'incomers' nevertheless necessitates heightened suspicion ('It is simply that the story presented in their [outsiders like Cox and Whaite] pictures is rather different from what it seems or sometimes purports to be', 297): a surprising conclusion for a book ostensibly aiming to be outward looking.

The production values of the book are high, with a generous 214 colour illustrations. However, the absence of collection information in any of the image captions (a longstanding feature of Lord's books) means that to locate illustrated artworks, readers must refer to the copyright acknowledgement section, organised alphabetically by provider rather than numerically by figure number) and the lack of bibliography hampers the ability of fellow scholars to follow up on the book's discoveries and insights.

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Notes

- ¹ On some of the problems of nationalist, including anti-colonialist nationalist, claims to authenticity see Harshana Rambukwella, *The Politics and Poetics of Authenticity: A Cultural Genealogy of Sinhala Nationalism* (London: UCL Press, 2018), pp. 1–23. On the untenability of myths of cultural purity see Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).
- ² Lord cites Édouard Manet's *Nana* (1877) as an example of the kind of artwork mistakenly assigned a universal value at the expense of artworks from marginalised cultures. On the importance of French nationalism for the canonisation of Impressionism, see *inter alia* Nicholas Parkinson, "'The Rayonnement of Our Ideals": French, German, and Nordic Painting in Fin-de-Siècle France', in Emily C. Burns and Alice M. Rudy Price (eds), *Mapping Impressionist Painting in Transnational Contexts* (New York and London: Routledge, 2021), pp. 158–74; Simon Kelly and April M. Watson (eds), *Impressionist France: Visions of Nation From Le Gray to Monet* (St Louis: St Louis Arts Museum and the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, 2013); Mary Tompkins Lewis, 'Introduction: The Critical History of Impressionism: An Overview', in Mary Tompkins Lewis (ed.), *Critical Readings in Impressionism and Post-Impressionism* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2007), pp. 1–29.
- ³ Historians undertook their own transnational turn about twenty years ago, on which see for example Patricia Clavin, 'Defining Transnationalism', *Contemporary European History*, 14/4 (2005), 421–39; C. A. Bayly, Sven Beckert, Matthew Connelly, Isabel Hofmeyr, Wendy Kozol, and Patricia Seed, 'AHR Conversation: On Transnational History', *American Historical Review*, 111/5 (2006), 1441–64. For recent global and transnational art histories of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries see for example Emily C. Burns and Alice M. Rudy Price (eds), *Mapping Impressionist Painting in Transnational Contexts* (New York and London: Routledge, 2021); Kobena Mercer (ed.), *Cosmopolitan Modernisms* (London: Institute of International Visual Arts, 2005). For recent scholarship on Wales adopting comparative and transnational methodologies see Huw Bowen (ed.), *Wales and the British Overseas Empire: Interactions and Influences, 1650–1830* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2012); T. M. Charles-Edwards and R. J. W. Evans (eds), *Wales and the wider world: Welsh history in an international context* (Donington: Shaun Tyas, 2010).
- ⁴ See for example Elizabeth Harney and Ruth B. Phillips (eds), *Mapping Modernisms: Art, Indigeneity, Colonialism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).
- ⁵ Partha Mitter, 'Decentering Modernism: Art History and Avant-Garde Art from the Periphery', *The Art Bulletin*, 90/4 (2008), 531–48.