

## Appointing a Poet Laureate: National and Poetic Identities in 1813\*

On 11 August 1813, poet laureate Henry James Pye died, the last representative of the eighteenth-century laureateship. Although not without his admirers, he had been a poet more widely mocked than widely read, and his reputation stood in severe contrast to those of the two men selected to replace him: Walter Scott, who refused the offer, and Robert Southey, who accepted it. Both Scott and Southey were perceived by contemporaries to be poets of the highest order, regularly acknowledged as 'geniuses' even by their harshest critics.<sup>1</sup> Southey had come to prominence in the 1790s: republican, pacifist, of dubious religion, poetically avant-garde and arguably the pre-eminent 'Jacobin' poet. By the early 1800s, however, his verse output consisted almost entirely of a series of difficult epics with little apparent contemporary relevance, while in prose he became increasingly known as an advocate of conservative and belligerent causes.<sup>2</sup> Scott, meanwhile, had made his mark as a poet in 1805, with the peerlessly successful *Lay of the Last Minstrel*. While Southey's sales and finances languished, Scott's series of 'metrical romances' made him the most popular writer of the age, and in politics he remained throughout life a resolute Tory.<sup>3</sup> The two men were good friends, wrote for the pro-government *Quarterly Review*, and were seen by many as the age's greatest poets. Scott's fame and wealth were two of the reasons he cited for turning down 'the laurel'; he thought the office's emolument more suited to a poet whose genius had gone financially unrewarded. Other reasons he gave were a desire to remain 'independent', and distaste for the office's duties and reputation.<sup>4</sup> Southey, however, voiced hopes of redeeming the office from its 'odeous' duties and recent ill-repute.<sup>5</sup>

\* I am grateful to Martha Vandrei, Nick Groom, Stephen Bygrave, Jonathan Conlin and the editors and anonymous referees of the *English Historical Review* for their help and feedback at various stages in the writing of this article, as well as to the Arts and Humanities Research Council and the South, West and Wales Doctoral Training Partnership for supporting my research.

1. J.O. Hayden, *Scott: The Critical Heritage* (London, 1970); L. Madden, *Robert Southey: The Critical Heritage* (London, 1972).

2. For Southey's career and reputation, see W.A. Speck, *Robert Southey: Entire Man of Letters* (London, 2006); for his politics, D.M. Craig, *Robert Southey and Romantic Apostasy: Political Argument in Britain, 1780–1840* (Woodbridge, 2007).

3. J.O. Hayden, 'Introduction', in Hayden, *Scott: The Critical Heritage*, pp. 1–23; J. Sutherland, *The Life of Walter Scott: A Critical Biography* (Oxford, 1995; pb. 1997).

4. *The Letters of Sir Walter Scott, III: 1811–1814*, ed. H.J.C. Grierson (London, 1932) [hereafter *Scott Letters*], pp. 322, 324–5, 335–6, 338–9, 341–51, 354–6 (quotation at 341).

5. *The Collected Letters of Robert Southey*, ed. L. Pratt, T. Fulford and I. Packer, available via *Romantic Circles* (University of Colorado Boulder, 2009), at [https://www.rc.umd.edu/editions/southey\\_letters](https://www.rc.umd.edu/editions/southey_letters) [hereafter *CLRS*], letter 2308, Southey to Edith Southey, 25 Sept. 1813; 2298, Southey to John Wilson Croker, 4 Sept. 1813; 2323, Southey to Scott, 5 Nov. 1813; 2529, Southey to Scott, 24 Dec. 1814 (for 'odeous' quotation).

The most striking aspect of the Scott–Southey selection, then, is the turnaround it represented upon the history of the eighteenth-century laureateship, and the drastic attempt at reinventing the office that it entailed. After John Dryden's tenure as laureate (1668–89), the office had steadily declined in respectability, with both its holders and its duties suffering increasing mockery; by the end of the eighteenth century, it was felt by many observers that the best course of action would be to abolish it. In which case, why did 1813 see so radical a shift? Why was the laureateship of Henry James Pye—political placeman and mediocre poet—offered to the great ‘genius’ Walter Scott, and then accepted by the politically dubious ‘genius’ Robert Southey? Why was an office that had once been bestowed upon such poetical non-entities as Laurence Eusden and Colley Cibber transformed into something deemed appropriate for Southey’s exalted successors, Wordsworth and Tennyson; something which has remained valued and respectable, and has managed ever since to appear as both a national and a courtly honour?

Previously, the selection process has been studied only by biographers of Scott and Southey, who have each based their account on the letters of whichever of the two poets they have been biographically concerned with. The most detailed and recent study has been that of Lynda Pratt, in the introduction to the third volume of Southey’s *Later Poetical Works*, in which Southey’s letters are given context by contemporary newspaper material.<sup>6</sup> But no scholar has yet examined the correspondences of those figures who were most involved in the selection process itself, or considered the wider implications of the shift from Pye to Southey.

It is the contention of this article that the selection of Scott and Southey for the laureateship is of signal importance for our understanding of the nature of both national identity and cultural production, and the place of the court with regards to both, at the start of the nineteenth century. In this article, therefore, I seek to develop and contribute to recent attempts to problematise the scholarly narratives of the 1980s and 1990s of a monolithic national identity taking hold over the course of the long eighteenth century; of a courtly, patronal culture giving way to a commercial, public culture; and of conceptualisations of ‘nation’ and ‘literature’ having increasingly little reference to the court and to state apparatus. First of all, this article will explore how historians have conceptualised national identity and the production of culture (especially poetry) in the long eighteenth century, and will situate the laureateship in the context of this scholarship. Secondly, the history of the laureateship up

6. L. Pratt, ‘Introduction’, in *Robert Southey: Later Poetical Works, 1811–1838*, ed. T. Fulford and L. Pratt (4 vols, London, 2012), vol. iii, pp. xi–xxviii.

to 1813 will be briefly surveyed, setting the scene for an investigation of the 1813 appointment process itself. The reasons for Scott and Southey's selections will be explored, particularly with regards to the wartime idea of the 'national bard', the concept of 'public opinion', and the roles of the *Edinburgh* and *Quarterly Reviews*. I will argue that Scott and Southey were selected due to the particular context of the war with Napoleon, which activated notions of Britishness and of the place of the court in national literary production, making it not just possible, but entirely appropriate, for Henry James Pye to be replaced by one of the greatest and most independent-minded poetical 'geniuses' of the age. But I will also emphasise that there was no single way of understanding Britishness, or the ideal mode of the production of poetry, and that what was appropriate for some observers was inappropriate for others. Finally, the article will emphasise the importance of national identity's usability. How Britishness was to be defined, and the idea of patriotic adherence to that definition, were subjects that were employed by various interest groups in various contexts, and, in the act of making use of them for their own needs, they also, necessarily, shaped and transfigured them. The different manifestations and ideals of Britishness cannot be understood without reference to the manifold stances with which they were bound up.

## I

The development of British national identity has been a subject of great interest and debate for the last thirty years. The landmark work here is Linda Colley's *Britons*, which has probably been cited in every publication on the subject since, whether to be endorsed, qualified or refuted. Of greatest relevance to this article is Colley's argument that national identity developed with little reference to the Hanoverian monarchy. The monarchy was unpopular, lacking the cultural and political significance of its forebears; indeed, national identity was to some extent a replacement for the personal loyalty to the Crown that had defined pre-modern kingdoms. Yet Colley does observe that, towards the end of his reign, George III was reinvented as a 'patriotic king', and the monarchy was repositioned as an important part of British national identity. In proportion as its political significance and agency faded, the monarchy could be symbolically incorporated into a national identity that had developed independently of it.<sup>7</sup>

Colley's formulation has never been universally accepted, but it has mostly succeeded in setting the terms of the debate, and the idea that national identity developed independently of the monarchy has received widespread tacit acceptance. But there have been moves away

7. L. Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707–1837* (1992; rev. edn, New Haven, CT, 2009),

from Colley's paradigm.<sup>8</sup> For example, Colley's picture of an insular Protestant national identity forged in opposition to a Catholic 'other' has been diluted by analyses which place British national identity in a more positive European context.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, recent work has shown that national identity was never monolithic, but could be imagined and used in different, conflicting ways. Colin Kidd provides a list of eight different positions which contemporaries might adopt with regards to the ancient constitution, a subject which, especially in the first half of the eighteenth century, was crucial to understandings of national identity. Each of Kidd's positions correlates reasonably well with a different political persuasion, reminding us that national identity did not exist on its own, but was inextricably bound up with a range of different kinds of identity, and was both shaped by, and shaping of, its associated political stances.<sup>10</sup> Martha Vandrei, meanwhile, has shown that different variants of patriotic feeling, dependent on the individual agent and the context of their articulation, could find expression through a choice of patriotic songs, and that one of those songs in particular, 'Britons, Strike Home', enjoyed a range of possible meanings due to the plasticity of its constituent terms.<sup>11</sup>

Essentially, then, the overall picture of national identity to have emerged over the last twenty years is of something fluid and multifarious, which, although based around certain common ideas and material realities, was endlessly reformulated by the context in which it was invoked and by the discursive requirements of whoever was doing the invoking. A particularly telling context for the study of national identity is provided by the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars. Faced with an ideological and militaristic threat that seemed at times to be existential, patriotism became a central subject of public discourse in the 1790s and early nineteenth century, and historians have been fascinated by its manifestations. In the last two decades, it has become increasingly apparent that the sense of Britishness on display was not simply a monolithic, long-gestating national identity that had been automatically spurred or developed by the pressures of war, but was more contingent, more diverse and more contested; it was something that was activated not just by the pressures of war, but by the ways in

pp. 199–241.

8. T. Claydon and I. McBride, 'The Trials of the Chosen Peoples: Recent Interpretations of Protestantism and National Identity in Britain and Ireland', in T. Claydon and I. McBride, eds., *Protestantism and National Identity: Britain and Ireland, c.1650–c.1850* (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 3–29; J.C.D. Clark, 'Protestantism, Nationalism, and National Identity, 1660–1832', *Historical Journal*, xliv (2000), pp. 249–76, at 259–76.

9. E.g. T. Claydon, *Europe and the Making of England, 1660–1760* (Cambridge, 2007); C. Kidd, *British Identities Before Nationalism: Ethnicity and Nationhood in the Atlantic World, 1600–1800* (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 9–10, 27–33, 59–72, 185–200, 207–49; and the essays in Claydon and McBride, eds., *Protestantism and National Identity*.

10. Kidd, *British Identities*, pp. 79–82.

11. M. Vandrei, "'Britons, Strike Home': Politics, Patriotism and Popular Song in British Culture, c.1695–1900", *Historical Research*, lxxvii (2014), pp. 679–702.

which different individuals and interest groups within Britain struggled to assert themselves, particularly with reference to the ideological and practical questions raised by the war situation.<sup>12</sup>

As well as being a crucial time for the development of national identity, the long eighteenth century has always been seen as vital in the development of 'modern' modes of cultural production. Indeed, the standard narrative of this latter development—a narrative which began in the eighteenth century itself, and found its landmark scholarly formulation in John Brewer's *Pleasures of the Imagination*—tends to be intimately connected with understandings of the former. The British people, losing interest in their monarchy and gaining pride in their nation, were also, increasingly, a nation of independent consumers, keen to buy into a certain notion of the British cultural (especially literary) heritage, and, with their purchasing power, gradually drawing culture away from the monarchical court and out into the marketplace. The patronage system which had predominated under the later Stuarts ceased to be the prevailing framework in which literature was created or conceived, just as conceptions of the nation and practices of politics became increasingly dissociated from the court. In this new climate, where literary works were produced for a bourgeois 'public' or marketplace, and where literature was associated with conceptions of British identity (rather than with the court), poets laureate became obsolescent.<sup>13</sup>

Because it was increasingly normal for writers and other kinds of artist to make a living through a generalised relationship with the public (that is, the national body of connoisseurs and consumers), rather than through a particular relationship with a court or a courtly patron, and because a newly strident and sophisticated national identity required an exalted cultural pantheon, there was (so the narrative continues) a transformation over the course of the eighteenth century of the notion of what a 'poet' ought to be. Thus, by the start of the nineteenth century, poetry was felt by many observers to inhere in certain great, independent 'geniuses' (predominantly Milton and Shakespeare), who had not subordinated their work to any court, party or patron, and whose relationship with the nation was a sort of mystical communion, rather than an earthly, financial connection with any form of (nation-) state apparatus. Various scholars have shown that 'genius' was a construction stemming from, on the one hand, a proud and assertive

12. J.E. Cookson, *The British Armed Nation, 1793–1815* (Oxford, 1997), esp. pp. 1–15, 209–45; M. Philp, ed., *Resisting Napoleon: The British Response to the Threat of Invasion, 1797–1815* (Aldershot, 2006), esp. Philp's introduction.

13. J. Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination: English Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (1997; new edn, London, 2013), pp. 2–3, 10–11, 15–54, 137–9; B. Hammond, *Professional Imaginative Writing in England, 1667–1740: 'Hackney for Bread'* (Oxford, 1997), pp. 4–6, 69–79, 198–200, 249–51. The term 'public' is, in this context, most closely associated with Jürgen Habermas. For a discussion of his 'public sphere' and its usage in eighteenth-century scholarship, and a revision thereof with regards to the role of the Hanoverian court, see H. Smith, *Georgian Monarchy: Politics and Culture, 1714–1760* (Cambridge, 2009), pp. 9, 232–8.

sense of Britain's history and cultural identity,<sup>14</sup> and, on the other, from the triumph of the literary marketplace, which allowed writers to become independent literary professionals.<sup>15</sup>

This late eighteenth-century interpretation of British literature generally contained some sense of historical change—the recognition that literary practices had been different in the past—but it also insisted upon a more transcendental sense of Britishness, in which the greatest writers had been independent, manly and patriotic. It therefore prescribed that modern poets ought not to be sullied by association with courts or governments. Leigh Hunt gave this interpretation an extended treatment in the leading *Examiner* articles that he wrote during the 1813 laureate appointment process, proclaiming that to abolish the office 'would become the character of the country'.<sup>16</sup> He admitted that Ben Jonson and Dryden had been courtly and subservient; but, 'since the times of those eminent men, things are quite altered ... It would not be endured now-a-days that a Prince like CHARLES the Second should be loaded with panegyric'.<sup>17</sup> However, he then declared Jonson and Dryden to be 'exception[s]', arguing that, in a country 'whose air is too free for slavery,' literary greatness was generally to be found united with 'the majestic beauty of freedom'.<sup>18</sup> The idea of a courtly poet was inconsistent with both the national canon and the national character.

In recent decades, however, certain scholars have expressed dissatisfaction with the above paradigm, and have questioned whether our models of literary production, and of what a 'national' literature should be, have not in fact been constructed upon the testimonies of a select group of writers—Pope, Johnson, 'the Romantics', Leigh Hunt et al.—whose opinions may have been not so much representative and authoritative as partial and partisan. These scholars have started to show that the eighteenth-century cultural scene was more complicated, and more enduringly 'traditional' in its practices, than has formerly been posited—for example, in the continuation of patronage.<sup>19</sup> Hannah Smith has shown that the early Hanoverian court did not simply give way to the commercial public in terms of the production of culture, but actually enjoyed a fruitful relationship *with* that commercial public, and, both in an ideological and a practical sense, remained important to the creation and propagation of cultural products.<sup>20</sup> Holger Hoock

14. E.g. R. Terry, *Poetry and the Making of the English Literary Past, 1660–1781* (Oxford, 2001); H.D. Weinbrot, *Britannia's Issue: The Rise of British Literature from Dryden to Ossian* (Cambridge, 1994).

15. E.g. N. Groom, 'Unoriginal Genius: Plagiarism and the Construction of 'Romantic' Authorship', in L. Bently, J. Davis and J.C. Ginsburg, eds., *Copyright and Piracy: An Interdisciplinary Critique* (Cambridge, 2010), pp. 271–99; Hammond, *Professional Imaginative Writing*.

16. *The Examiner*, 15 Aug. 1813, p. 514.

17. *The Examiner*, 29 Aug. 1813, p. 544.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 545.

19. E.g. D. Griffin, *Literary Patronage in England, 1650–1800* (Cambridge, 1996).

20. Smith, *Georgian Monarchy*, pp. 123–4, 135–42, 156–60, 232–8, 245.

argues explicitly against any such simplistic dichotomies as commercial versus state, showing instead that the state (for example) remained an essential agent in British cultural endeavour, and that this agency was actuated not in competition with other, private and commercial, agents, but in relation to them.<sup>21</sup>

The picture that therefore emerges is of court and state retaining and adapting their positions in the realm of culture, and doing so in conjunction with the newer, commercial agents. This can also be witnessed in the case of the laureateship. Throughout the eighteenth century, for example, many newspapers would routinely print the texts of the biannual laureate odes.<sup>22</sup> Laureates themselves, when selling their non-official works on the market, would advertise their privileged courtly position on their title pages.<sup>23</sup> Although there were clearly many and increasing numbers of eighteenth-century observers who reviled the laureateship, and whose conceptualisations of literature and of the nation left no place for any such position, it would also seem to be the case that, for many readers and writers, older, more 'traditional' conceptualisations remained valid. The argument of this article is that, in the 1813 selection of Scott and Southey, we see just these conceptualisations at play; and that, having never entirely disappeared over the course of the eighteenth century, they were newly drawn upon and reactivated due to the impetus of the Napoleonic Wars and the exigencies of the struggle that was being played out in the pages of the *Edinburgh* and *Quarterly Reviews* (and elsewhere).

What, then, can a study of the laureateship, and particularly of the 1813 appointment process, tell us with regard to the scholarship that has just been summarised? Essentially, this article argues that, through such a study, the notions of monolithic development in national identity and cultural production can be further problematised, and the nature of the relationship between the two can be better revealed. Properly speaking, there are two strands of scholarship being engaged with here, but, as well as sharing elements in common—in particular, the idea that the court was sidelined in favour of more 'public' conceptions and modes of doing things—there is also a fascinating intersection between the two, and it is an intersection upon which this interdisciplinary study of the laureateship is situated. Looking at the 1813 appointment process shows us that national identity was contingent, contested and various: a constellation of ideas that could be activated, and used, in any number of different ways, to suit any number of different contexts. It will further be shown that cultural production was, likewise, something

21. H. Hoock, *Empires of the Imagination: Politics, War, and the Arts in the British World, 1750–1850* (London, 2010).

22. E.g. *Lloyd's Evening Post*, 1–4 June 1770; *London Evening Post*, 2–5 June 1770; *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser*, 4 June 1770.

23. E.g. Laurence Eusden's *Three Poems* (London, 1722) and Thomas Warton's posthumous *The Poems on Various Subjects* (London, 1791).

that existed in a variety of different forms, and that, as well as there being an independent, commerce-based 'national literary' ideal, there was also an equally viable formulation of 'national literature' in which the court enjoyed a continuing centrality. It is this latter formulation—particularly important in wartime—that the laureateship is best placed to reveal, because it was a formulation of which the laureateship was the prime instrument.

## II

The modern, salaried position of poet laureate was created in 1668 for John Dryden. Before Dryden's appointment, the laureateship had been a vague and somewhat mythological idea, found initially in Ancient Greece: that a poet's achievement should be marked by his wearing of a crown of laurel, and that the laurel-crowned poet was not only an analogue to the actually crowned monarch, but was a necessary partner to him, receiving his patronage and, in turn, spreading his fame across time and space through the medium of poetry—a relationship that was idealised in the model of Virgil and Augustus. This idea had been commonly alluded to by poets without very often taking on a material, monetised form. But there had been several English poets prior to Dryden who had both received pensions from the court and been referred to by others as 'poet laureate', most notably Jonson and William Davenant. By the time that Davenant died in 1668, his claims to having been some kind of official 'poet laureate' were widely accepted, and Charles II was happy to formalise the laureate idea into a distinct salaried office. He granted it to John Dryden, who was the most popular playwright and most well-respected versifier of the time, and who was intimate with the networks of courtly patronage.<sup>24</sup>

Dryden was, in contemporary eyes, the most suitable choice for any such official distinction, and his reputation as an ideal laureate was to endure down to the early nineteenth century (and beyond). However, because of the obfuscations of Jonson and Davenant, Dryden's status as the first official poet laureate was never acknowledged; he was viewed at the time, and by subsequent generations, as the tenant of an older office. By the early nineteenth century, this tradition had become more spurious still. A host of older poets had been tacked together into a supposed laureate succession, generally because they were known to have been close to the court, or had written particularly courtly poetry, or had been granted a pension. Thus, when Scott, Southey and their contemporaries looked back on the history of the laureateship, they saw

24. E.K. Broadus, *The Laureateship: A Study of the Office of Poet Laureate in England with Some Account of the Poets* (Oxford, 1921), pp. 15–23, 33–64; John Selden, *Titles of Honour* (3rd edn, London, 1672), pp. 333–42.

a glowing line of pre-Drydenic eminencies, stretching from Chaucer to Spenser to Jonson, and thence to Dryden himself.<sup>25</sup>

But they also saw a line of post-Drydenic successors who were much more down to earth. Dryden had been succeeded in 1689 by his literary and political rival, Thomas Shadwell, as a result of the Glorious Revolution. Shadwell, one of the period's leading playwrights, had not been as strange a choice for the office as he was later to appear; in seventeenth-century parlance, a playwright was a 'poet', and drama was arguably the highest form of 'poetry'. But his appointment was clearly made for party-political reasons.<sup>26</sup> Following Shadwell was Nahum Tate, whose appointment was not clearly a matter of anything at all, given that he had neither political nor poetical distinction. However, both he and Shadwell had been consistent beneficiaries of the largesse of the Earl of Dorset prior to their appointments as laureate, and Dorset had been made lord chamberlain following the Glorious Revolution.<sup>27</sup> Being already well-regarded as a judge and patron of literature, Dorset seems to have decided to make the laureateship his own especial concern, and to use it to reward his favoured poets.

It was during Dorset's tenure as chamberlain, and Shadwell and Tate's tenures as laureate, that the office underwent its most significant developments before 1813; developments which were to determine the character and, as a result, the reputation of the eighteenth-century laureateship. The post went from being an anomalous position on the margins of the court, to being grouped in the 'Ceremonies' staff under the auspices of the lord chamberlain, who therefore now had the office in his gift.<sup>28</sup> With this new categorisation came a new responsibility: Shadwell and Tate began to write the words of the odes that were performed at court on the reigning monarch's birthday and on New Year's Day. This occasional practice hardened into a formal duty on the appointment of Nicholas Rowe (1715); laureates were henceforth officially responsible for writing these biannual odes for the king.<sup>29</sup> Whereas Dryden's laureateship had been a mark of Virgilian distinction, the Hanoverian laureateship was to be a narrower, more technical office, defined by its specific duties.

Rowe was the leading tragedian of his day, and was, therefore, a respectable choice for laureate. But he was also someone who had loyally

25. *The Examiner*, 15 Aug. 1813, pp. 513–4, and 16 Jan. 1814, p. 42; *Gentleman's Magazine*, Sept. 1813, p. 295; *Scott Letters*, pp. 336, 365, 380–81; Broadus, *Laureateship*, pp. iv, 1, 102.

26. A.S. Borgman, *Thomas Shadwell: His Life and Comedies* (New York, 1928), pp. 78, 94–104; Broadus, *Laureateship*, pp. 74–88.

27. Maidstone, Kent History and Library Centre, Sackville MSS, U269 A7/6, A7/12, A7/13, A7/17, A7/18, A7/19, A7/20, A7/23, A7/24, A7/25, A7/26, A7/28, accounts kept for Charles Sackville.

28. Kew, The National Archives [hereafter TNA], Records of the Lord Chamberlain and other officers of the Royal Household, LC 3/3–7, Establishment Books, 1695–1727; LC 5/201, fos. 181, 204–46, 450, establishment lists and list of places in the Lord Chamberlain's disposal, in Precedent Book, 1660–89.

29. R. McGuinness, *English Court Odes, 1660–1820* (Oxford, 1971), pp. 1–11, 62, 141.

served the Whig party in a number of non-literary positions prior to his accession to the laureateship, and who, for his political loyalties and willingness to serve, would continue to accumulate offices and salaries thereafter.<sup>30</sup> This career history was at least as significant in his accession as the respectability of his literary endeavours. Following his death in 1718, his replacement was the little-known Cambridge fellow, Laurence Eusden, who was appointed due to having written an epithalamium for the then lord chamberlain.<sup>31</sup> Eusden passed his short life in amiable, miserable, drunken obscurity, and was succeeded by Colley Cibber. Cibber, again, was primarily a playwright, but he was also a figure of controversy and ridicule, and, by the time of his appointment (1730), the elision of 'playwright' with 'poet' was finally breaking down. He was close, personally and politically, to certain leading Whig magnates and court figures, and it was evidently to these connections that he owed the office. His laureate odes were widely considered inept; he even developed a self-deprecating and self-parodying attitude towards them, which, however much it may have disarmed criticism against himself (not very much), could only have been damaging for the reputation of the office.<sup>32</sup> His toxic effect on the laureateship was compounded by his long tenure (1730–57).

But the eighteenth-century laureateship was not to remain as laughable an office as it came to appear in retrospect. Upon Cibber's death, the position was given to William Whitehead, whose employers and patrons, the Villiers family, had been interceding with ministers for several years on his behalf, and had already procured him the position of secretary and registrar to the Order of the Bath.<sup>33</sup> Whitehead was a well-respected poet, and many of his contemporaries felt that he redeemed the laureateship after the debasements of Cibber.<sup>34</sup> But (due to the developments described above) many others had turned implacably against the office by this time, either in a spirit of innocent mockery, or in a stern conviction that it should be abolished.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, irrespective of his position as laureate, Whitehead's kind of poetry and his version of the poetic vocation were significantly at odds with the ideas that were to gain ground at the end of the century. As a result, like so many late eighteenth-century poets, he was to be forgotten about by

30. A. Sherbo, 'Rowe, Nicholas (1674–1718)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* [hereafter *ODNB*].

31. Laurence Eusden, *A Poem on the Marriage Of His Grace the Duke of Newcastle* (London, 1717).

32. Broadus, *Laureateship*, pp. 119–135.

33. British Library [hereafter BL], Newcastle Papers, Add. MS 32733, fo. 343, Jersey to Newcastle, 29 Nov. 1753; London Metropolitan Archives, Jersey MSS, ACC/0510/242, Whitehead to Jersey, 7 June 1755; William Mason, 'Memoirs of the Life and Writings of Mr. William Whitehead', in William Whitehead, *Poems*, III, ed. William Mason (York, 1788), pp. 1–129, at 86.

34. See, for example, *The Correspondence of Thomas Warton*, ed. D. Fairer (London, 1995), letter 482, from Edmond Malone.

35. E.g. *Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser*, 28 Apr. 1785; Broadus, *Laureateship*, pp. 144–6, 154–5.

the succeeding generation. His long tenure (1757–85) thus came to be seen as, at best, a kind of empty space, into which the Cibberian cloud subconsciously flowed and expanded.

Whitehead was succeeded by Thomas Warton, perhaps due to George III's personal intervention.<sup>36</sup> Warton was a substantial literary figure, though more as a scholar than as a poet, and had actually written about the laureateship in his *History of English Poetry*; there, he had called the office 'confessedly Gothic, and unaccommodated to modern manners', and had wished for the abolition of the biannual ode duty.<sup>37</sup> As laureate, he nonetheless continued producing the odes, but his tenure was short; he died in 1790, and thus failed to leave much of a mark on the office's history or reputation. His successor, Henry James Pye, was a very different sort of appointee. He was a relatively undistinguished and old-fashioned poet, and had served as an MP for Berkshire.<sup>38</sup> Both before and after becoming laureate, he pestered William Pitt with requests for offices and sinecures, and reminded him of unfulfilled promises of favour.<sup>39</sup> The laureateship seems to have been given to him due to this patronal and political connection, rather than because anyone thought him an especially impressive poet.<sup>40</sup> While laureate, Pye's name became a byword for bad poetry in certain quarters.<sup>41</sup>

It is therefore not the case that every eighteenth-century poet laureate was considered contemptible in his own day. But due to changing tastes, and changing ideas of what constituted 'poetry', almost all of them had come to seem either contemptible or inappropriate by 1813. But the office was not despised simply for the unworthiness of its holders. Certainly, they brought its reputation down; but, over the course of the eighteenth century, it became increasingly self-evident to vast swathes of observers that such an office could only ever be productive of bad poetry, and attractive to bad poets.<sup>42</sup> By the early nineteenth century, many contemporaries did indeed conceive of British identity, and of the place of literature within it, in a similar way to that which later scholars have generally expected of them. Some commentators therefore suggested the laureateship be made a sinecure, to make it respectable; others, like Hunt, felt respectability was impossible, and demanded the office's abolition.<sup>43</sup>

This was not, however, the whole story. For while it was certainly the case that the chorus of disapproval against the laureateship became

36. *General Advertiser*, 25 Apr. 1785; *General Evening Post*, 28–30 Apr. 1785.

37. Thomas Warton, *The History of English Poetry* (3 vols, London, 1778), ii. 133.

38. J. Sambrook, 'Pye, Henry James (1745–1813)', *ODNB*.

39. TNA, Chatham Papers, PRO 30/8/169, fos. 15, 18, 256-b, 258–265, Pye to Pitt and William Pratt, 27 July 1784–15 Apr. 1795.

40. *The Examiner*, 15 Aug. 1813, p. 523.

41. See Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Abinger c.15, fo. 40, Thomas Lawrence to William Godwin, n.d.

42. Broadus, *Laureateship*, pp. 135, 154.

43. *Ibid.*, pp. 154–5; *The Examiner*, 15 Aug. 1813, pp. 513–14; *Gentleman's Magazine*, Sept. 1813, pp. 295–6.

louder as the eighteenth century wore on, and while the aforementioned developments in cultural production and in national identity can be widely identified, the 1813 selection of Scott and Southey indicates the prevalence of a different strand of opinion.

### III

Upon Pye's death, there was uncertainty about the procedure for selecting a new laureate, and there is still some confusion among scholars as to how events unfolded.<sup>44</sup> Scott's son-in-law and biographer John Gibson Lockhart wrote that the Prince Regent (the future King George IV) first offered the post to Scott. Scott refused, and recommended Southey to John Wilson Croker (secretary to the Admiralty), who—in accordance with this advice—had Southey selected.<sup>45</sup> But the story given by Southey and his family was different. Southey stated that both Croker and the prince were his advocates from the start, but that the prime minister (Lord Liverpool) and the Marquess of Hertford (who, as lord chamberlain, officially had the office in his gift) had offered the laurel to Scott without telling anyone. The prince, upon hearing this, was supposedly upset, and insisted that he wanted Southey to have it, but agreed to wait for Scott's reply.<sup>46</sup>

On 18 August, a week after Pye's death, Hertford sent a letter to Liverpool.<sup>47</sup> Although the office was in his gift, and although he expressed a preference for Scott, Hertford—here and throughout—seemed anxious to solicit Liverpool's approval for everything. He mentioned that Southey had been 'strongly recommended' to him by Croker, whose consistent advocacy is confirmed by other sources.<sup>48</sup> Croker, contrary to Lockhart's beliefs, was ardently in favour of Southey from the beginning, and took quite an interest in the selection of the new laureate, despite its being far outside his official responsibilities. This is unsurprising: he was a connoisseur and writer of poetry, was Southey's friend and fellow-writer for the *Quarterly Review*, and was the dedicatee of Southey's *Life of Nelson* (1813).<sup>49</sup> Hertford was also being pressured by his son, the Earl of Yarmouth, who in a later letter to Croker expressed his anxiety to persuade his father in favour of Southey.<sup>50</sup> Nevertheless,

44. Scott scholars generally follow Lockhart's line, Southey scholars generally follow Southey's: Pratt, 'Introduction', pp. xii–xv; Speck, *Southey*, pp. 154–5; Sutherland, *Scott*, p. 163.

45. John Gibson Lockhart, *Memoirs of the Life of Sir Walter Scott, Bart.* (10 vols, Edinburgh, 1837), iii. 79–88.

46. CLRS, 2305, Southey to Charles Watkin Williams Wynn, 20 Sept. 1813; 2308, Southey to Edith Southey, 25 Sept. 1813.

47. BL, Liverpool Papers, Add. MS 38254, fos. 93–4, Hertford to Liverpool, 18 Aug. 1813.

48. E.g. CLRS, 2299, Southey to Edith Southey, 5[–] Sept. 1813; 2305, Southey to Charles Watkin Williams Wynn, 20 Sept. 1813.

49. BL, Croker Papers, Add. MS 52470, fos. 1–2, letters between Southey and Croker, 1813; Speck, *Southey*, p. 143.

50. BL, Hertford Papers, Add. MS 60286, fos. 55–6, Yarmouth to Croker, 2[4?] Sept. 1813.

Hertford favoured Scott—though doubting that Scott would accept the post, since he was rich enough already—and deferred to Liverpool. He also warned that caution was in order, since ‘some of our poets’ had previously been ‘much into democratical Politicks’: a reference primarily to Southey, whose works he later admitted being unfamiliar with, but whose reputation he evidently knew.<sup>51</sup>

While Hertford wrote to Liverpool, someone else took the initiative: James Stanier Clarke, librarian to the Prince Regent and historiographer royal. This latter post he had gained in preference to Southey, and there was a good deal of hostility between the two men. Southey had written damning reviews of a couple of Clarke’s works, one of them being his biography of Nelson, of which Southey had then further damaged the sales by publishing his own. Clarke, on the other hand, had written a brutal review of Southey’s *Madoc* in the *Monthly Review*.<sup>52</sup> He thus had good reasons to wish that Southey would not be made laureate. Perhaps more importantly, he also had a great affection for Scott. Clarke had sent presentation copies of all his works to Scott for approval, going as far back as 1803, and his determined behaviour over the laureateship confirms the strength of his feelings.<sup>53</sup> While Hertford dithered, Clarke wrote to Scott, offering him the laurel in enthusiastic terms, and making clear his own active role in informing the prince of ‘my earnest wish and anxious desire’.<sup>54</sup> But Clarke was also prepared to be disingenuous. Yarmouth later grumbled to Croker that, if not for ‘that stupid fellow Clarke’, he would have persuaded Hertford to offer the laureate to Southey, but that Clarke had claimed to have received a letter from Scott, the tenor of which left ‘no doubt he wished for the Laureatship’.<sup>55</sup> Clarke thus seems to have lied to prevent Yarmouth, and perhaps others, persuading Hertford in favour of Southey. He evidently relished the chance of being Scott’s co-worker, and of doing him a favour. But his efforts were in vain; Scott declined, and recommended instead Clarke’s nemesis, Southey.

The Southey camp believed that Liverpool offered Scott the office unbeknown to the Prince Regent, who was disgruntled at this, because he wanted Southey to have it. The reason ascribed to the prince was that Southey had ‘written some good things on the Spaniards’, which, as shall be discussed below, was a more telling reason than it may at first appear.<sup>56</sup> Yet in his letter to Scott offering him the laurel, Hertford wrote that he had spoken to the prince and been authorised to make the offer.<sup>57</sup> (Liverpool had probably expressed his approval for Scott

51. BL, Liverpool Papers, Add. MS 38254, fos. 93–4, Hertford to Liverpool, 18 Aug. 1813.

52. CLRS, 2278, Southey to John Murray, 9 July 1813; Speck, *Southey*, pp. 123, 135–7, 149.

53. *Scott Letters*, p. 344, n. 1.

54. Lockhart, *Life of Scott*, p. 80.

55. BL, Hertford Papers, Add. MS 60286, fos. 55–6, Yarmouth to Croker, 2[4?] Sept. 1813.

56. CLRS, 2305, Southey to Charles Watkin Williams Wynn, 20 Sept. 1813.

57. Lockhart, *Life of Scott*, pp. 80–81.

prior to this.) Thus, both Clarke and Hertford claimed royal backing for Scott. This seems plausible: the prince was a great fan of Scott's. When he met Lord Byron in 1812, they talked at length on poetry, and 'the Prince's great delight was the writings of Walter Scott'; he 'preferred [Scott] to every bard past & present'.<sup>58</sup> It is therefore likely that the prince wanted Scott for the position, contrary to Southey's assertion or belief that he had favoured Southey as laureate from the outset.

Following Scott's refusal, it seems that Southey's selection was undisputed. In a letter of 7 September, Southey assured his wife that 'the Prince's pleasure has been so fully exprest' that his appointment was guaranteed.<sup>59</sup> The only hint of trouble comes in the letter from Yarmouth to Croker, in which he wrote 'Scott has declined the Bays = I have endeavoured to persuade my father to offer it to Southey but he seemed nervous as to what S[outhey] may at some former time have written = I have however persuaded him ... to leave the thing to the disposition of government & I think he will write to this effect to Lord Liv[erpool] either today or tomorrow = so you had better say a word to L[ord] L[iverpool]'.<sup>60</sup> Liverpool was evidently a key figure in this process, despite the selection being more the preserve of Hertford and the Prince Regent. After Scott's rejection, things moved slowly.<sup>61</sup> The newspapers, however, were convinced of Southey's appointment by mid-September.<sup>62</sup> On 20 October, apparently in accordance with Hertford's wishes (or, rather, his caution), Liverpool wrote to Hertford confirming his choice. Various formalities ensued over the next couple of weeks, and on 13 November the *London Gazette* announced Southey's appointment.<sup>63</sup>

On 13 October (a week before Liverpool had given Hertford the final confirmation), Hertford had written to Liverpool, reminding him that, after Scott's rejection, 'you expressed to me your preference of Mr Southey ... if your Lordship still continues of the same opinion I will propose his appointment to the Prince Regent ... Mr Southey's person and writings happen to be unknown to me, except thro' Mr Croker's representation to whom your Lordship expressed your intention of speaking on the subject'.<sup>64</sup> Liverpool, then, saw Croker as important to the process of selection, or at least wished to acknowledge his expertise and effort. The overall impression of the 70-year-old Hertford given by his letters is of caution, anxiety over Southey's former opinions,

58. *Scott Letters*, p. 135, n. 1 (John Murray's report of the meeting); pp. 138–9, n. 1 (Byron's report).

59. CLRS, 2299, Southey to Edith Southey, 5[–7] Sept. 1813.

60. BL, Hertford Papers, Add. MS 60286, fos. 55–6, Yarmouth to Croker, 2[4?] Sept. 1813.

61. CLRS, 2323, Southey to Walter Scott, 5 Nov. 1813.

62. *Gentleman's Magazine*, Sept. 1813, p. 295; *Scott Letters*, p. 365.

63. *Gentleman's Magazine*, Nov. 1813, p. 497. CSLR, 2313, Southey to Edith Southey, 16[–22] Oct. 1813; 2318, Southey to Edith Southey, 28 Oct. 1813; 2323, Southey to Walter Scott, 5 Nov. 1813; 2324, Southey to Edith Southey, 5 Nov. 1813. Speck, *Southey*, p. 156.

64. BL, Liverpool Papers, Add. MS 74091, fo. 72, Hertford to Liverpool, 13 Oct. 1813.

and a desire to please the government. He was beset by the arguments of Croker and Yarmouth in favour of Southey, but held firm in his adherence to Liverpool's opinion and his distaste for Southey. Perhaps this distaste was even responsible for the delays: he was not just being unduly exact in soliciting Liverpool's approval, but was prevaricating and perhaps arguing against Southey's appointment.

From the start, then, the Prince Regent wanted Scott to be laureate. In this he was in agreement with Liverpool, Hertford and Clarke. The alliance was formidable: prince, prime minister, lord chamberlain and the very keen historiographer royal. Supporting Southey, meanwhile, were Croker (who was zealous in the matter, but lacked authority over it) and Yarmouth, who may have helped overcome Hertford's reluctance towards Southey, but only after Scott had already refused. After this refusal, the Prince Regent and Liverpool came immediately around to Southey, and Hertford, despite his worries, followed everyone else. Throughout the process, there was much confusion, but never any real doubt: only Scott could be offered it initially; after him, only Southey.

But why was it that the prince, prime minister, lord chamberlain and others decided to offer the laurel to two of the great 'geniuses' of the age—of whom the eventual recipient was an unpredictable and independent-minded figure—while not considering the sorts of poet who had formerly been chosen for the office: more amenable creatures, blessed with a solid desire for political service or career advancement, studied in the art of gaining offices through patronage? There was certainly no shortage of alternative candidates; Hertford informed Liverpool early on that he had received various applications, from poets and non-poets alike. The post could also have been bestowed on someone who had made no application at all. But what is striking, in the relevant correspondence of the time, is the general consensus that the laureateship should be given to the nation's greatest poet. Southey's letters repeatedly explained that his advocates expected the office to be bestowed according to the principle of *detur digniori* ('to be given to the worthiest'), and that they therefore presumed that Southey would be appointed, but that, in fact, Liverpool and Hertford 'had consulted together upon whom the vacant honour could most properly be bestowed.—Scott was the greatest poet of the day, & to Scott therefore they had written to offer it'.<sup>65</sup> Scott likewise supposed that the office should go to the most talented poet, and to someone who had dedicated their life to poetry. The Prince Regent was referred to in various letters as wanting to appoint the best poet; even Hertford, in his first letter to Liverpool on the subject, advocated Scott—'Of Walter Scott's talent I think most highly—but he also singled out Southey on the basis that he is 'strongly recommended by

65. CLRS, 2305, Southey to Charles Watkin Williams Wynn, 20 Sept. 1813. See also 2307, Southey to Charles Danvers, 21 Sept. 1813.

Mr Croker, who is both a very good poet and a good judge of Poetry'.<sup>66</sup> No other criteria seem to have been expressed, except by the prince in his comment that Southey had 'written some good things on the Spaniards', and, negatively, by Hertford in his worries about Southey's political reputation (which worries he eventually set aside). Considering the history of the laureateship up to 1813, this is remarkable. Not only did the leading players in this process uniformly act on the idea that the laureate should be the nation's greatest poet, but they shared even the assumption that this was the only appropriate choice. The laureateship was being reconceptualised as a meritocratic crown, and national poetic 'genius' as something which should be brought into a close, Virgilian–Augustan relationship with the court. While this in itself indicates the enduringness of more 'traditional' and courtly ideas of the nation and of literature than are commonly ascribed to this period, it also raises the question of why such ideas should have been manifested in this way in 1813 in particular. The answer has much to do with the context of the Napoleonic Wars.

#### IV

As we have seen, much recent scholarly attention has focused on the ways in which national identity manifested during the Napoleonic Wars, and on how, faced with a regicidal France and its tyrannical emperor, the Hanoverian monarchy assumed a more prominent place in ideas of Britishness than it had done for some time. Particularly relevant, in this context, is the idea of the 'national bard'. Simon Bainbridge has described how, in the 1790s, there were persistent calls for a poet to step forwards and prove himself worthy of the war, commemorating the great events that were unfolding, and inspiring the nation to victory. The 'bard' was seen as a figure of the ancient British past, a mystical figure 'combining the roles of historian and prophet, fighter for liberty and inspired poet in communion with nature and the national memory', but this figure was also embodied by more corporeal British and non-British epic poets, such as Milton, Homer and Virgil. Many poets tried to assume such a role, but Walter Scott, from 1805 onwards, was the man recognised as doing so.<sup>67</sup>

It is evident from Scott's poetry that he himself was fixated on the idea of bards in general, and that, for him, the bardic figure was almost necessarily a *national* bard, who lived in a sort of communion with his great, dead forebears.<sup>68</sup> Furthermore, Scott's work tended to merge

66. BL, Liverpool Papers, Add. MS 38254, fos. 93–4, Hertford to Liverpool, 18 Aug. 1813.

67. S. Bainbridge, *British Poetry and the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars: Visions of Conflict* (Oxford, 2003), pp. 1, 39, 46–53.

68. E.g. *The Lady of the Lake* (1810), in *The Works of Sir Walter Scott* (Ware, 1995), pp. 123, 176–9; *Rokeby* (1813), pp. 228, 244–5, 250–51, 255. All references to Scott's poetry are to this Wordsworth Poetry Library edition.

Scott-as-bard with the bards in his stories. He used the terms 'bard', 'minstrel' and 'poet' near-synonymously, both for such figures in general and for himself, and often blurred the boundaries between himself, his narrators, his characters and generic bardic types. Fittingly, all of his long, narrative poems (the works for which he was best known) evinced a fervent patriotism which—though centred on Scotland—extended to the whole of Britain, and his main subject matter was war.<sup>69</sup> All of this was noted by critics. Scott was perceived as constantly interrogating the roles and powers of the bard, and as adopting that role for himself.<sup>70</sup>

Of course, it could be argued that the figure of the 'national bard', both in Scott's work and in the estimation of the reading nation which was calling for such a figure and was lapping up Scott's publications, was a modern, 'independent' genius—the heir to Homer and Milton, rather than to Virgil and Dryden—and had little to do with courts. But, in fact, Scott and also Southey put forward an ideal of the bardic figure that was intimately associated with courts and patrons—an ideal, even, that was rooted in the traditional image of the laureated Virgil, loyally serving his prince and turning that prince's achievements into deathless verse. In Scott's first major work, *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* (1805), the eponymous minstrel sang for a noble patroness, beguiled 'noble youths' with songs of 'achievements high, / And circumstance of chivalry', and, as his highest honour, had once 'play'd ... to King Charles the Good'.<sup>71</sup> In *Marmion* (1808), Scott described how his poetry, though 'feeble', harked back to the 'mightiest chiefs of British song': Spenser, Milton and Dryden.<sup>72</sup> To early nineteenth-century readers, the characterisation of two of those three figures as 'poets laureate', intimately associated with their monarchs and having produced their greatest work in honour of those monarchs, would have been familiar. If the canonical, bardic ideal required a poet to be in a kind of timeless communion with his illustrious forebears, then it was an ideal that validated not only a sense of national pride, but also, potentially, the courtly-patronal mode of writing practised by those poets and integral to their poetic identities.

By 1805, Southey had likewise come to see war as the main subject of the great poet, and posited a bard figure as the natural associate of such belligerence. His long poem *Madoc*, about a Welsh warrior king, featured the bardic figure prominently, and included a passage in which a 'chief of Bards' entertained Madoc by singing about Welshmen—the original Britons—defeating the 'haughty' Normans; that is, the French.<sup>73</sup> As in Scott's poetry, the bardic figure was associated with Southey himself, and

69. E.g. *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*, pp. 25, 30; *Marmion*, pp. 47–50, 68–70, 88–90.

70. *Eclectic Review*, Aug. 1811, p. 673; *Quarterly Review*, Dec. 1812, p. 485; *Critical Review*, Mar. 1813, p. 258.

71. *Last Minstrel*, pp. 4, 43.

72. *Marmion*, pp. 49–51.

73. *Robert Southey: Poetical Works, 1793–1810*, ed. L. Pratt (5 vols, London, 2004), ii. 20–21.

the various bards who appeared in *Madoc* were, like Scott's bards, the necessary companions to great events, enjoying a symbiotic relationship with their warrior princes.<sup>74</sup> Southey's bards did not sing just for Britain, but for British kings. At one point, Southey even demanded, 'O prince, receive the Bard!—at which request, 'forward sprung the Prince ... And for the comrade of his enterprize, / With joyful welcome, hailed the joyful Bard.'<sup>75</sup> The symmetry of joyfulness in that final line emphasised the extent to which Southey was, in 1805, envisioning the figure of the national bard in terms of the traditional, mutually necessary relationship between great poet and great prince. Before Southey, Thomas Gray had given the Welsh bardic figure its most famous form in his 1757 Pindaric ode, *The Bard*. That poem had dramatised the confrontation between ancient, mystical Wales and the invading king, Edward I, and it had begun with the exclamation: 'Ruin seize thee, ruthless King!'<sup>76</sup> Now, Southey's *Madoc* was enacting a reconciliation (foreseen in the closing pages of Gray's *Bard*), bringing bard and king, and Wales and England, back into each other's embrace.<sup>77</sup>

The work of both Scott and Southey, then—as early as 1805—set out an idea of the great national poet as being someone connected with, and indeed validated by his monarch. This bard was not found enacting some supposed 'modern' role, of the independent genius communing only with his literary forebears and with the British 'public'. Although he was indeed a great national figure, and was rooted in a national canon, this bard was in fact enacting a more traditional role, which was embodied in the idea of the laureateship. The canon being invoked was that of Chaucer, Spenser, Jonson and Dryden, as much as it was that of Milton.

When Southey was appointed laureate, these themes were re-articulated not just by his laureate poems, but by those who looked favourably on him and on the regime that had appointed him. One sonneteer exulted,

when, as now,  
The man whom fancy's richest gifts endow  
Attains the title, and the nation's voice  
Applauds and ratifies the monarch's choice,  
Honour indeed is honour. Southey, thou  
Must ...  
sound the patriotic trump which calls to Fame,  
And be the voice of Britain to the world.  
O yet maintain thy free and lofty mind,  
Thy sovereign—God; thy country—all mankind.<sup>78</sup>

74. *Ibid.*, ii. 8, 69–71.

75. *Ibid.*, ii. 79.

76. Thomas Gray, *Odes* (Strawberry Hill, 1757), p. 13.

77. *Ibid.*, pp. 19–21.

78. *Liverpool Mercury*, 19 Nov. 1813, quoted by Pratt, 'Introduction', p. xvi.

There was no hint of discrepancy here between Britishness, the court or poetic merit; in fact, the sonnet wove the various strands together in its texture and rhyme scheme, presenting them as naturally congruent. The great poet, endowed with 'fancy's richest gifts', was appointed laureate by a national will and a monarchical choice working in perfect harmony, and the great poet was thereby exalted to a status in which, while still an independent genius (of 'free and lofty mind', serving God and mankind), he functioned as the 'patriotic ... voice of Britain'. There was a powerful sense of necessity and propriety to this poem. It delivered a picture of the laureateship as the highest form of poetry, in which genius, national identity and courtly office worked together and found their perfection in each other; and, by framing the picture in the phrase, 'when, as now', it suggested a kind of transcendental apotheosis, recurring at rare, numinous moments throughout history. The laureateship, far from being an anachronism, was thus the symbolic and instrumental form of poetry's essence, in that, being given its supreme verification by king and country, it served and was animated by a patriotic, courtly spirit.

## V

Of course, none of this is to say that wartime national identity was simply a coherent, 'traditional' force, centred on belligerence, bards and a monarchical court. Wartime national identity was, instead, something fluid, contested and contingent, and it needs to be explored in terms of its various uses. Different agents drew on different elements to suit their own practical and discursive purposes. Something of this can be seen even with regard to Scott's bardic poetry, particularly *Roderick* (1811). In this poem, Scott addressed the great national events at hand.

The main subject matter of the poem was the Peninsular War, as seen in a vision by the Visigothic king, Roderick. Like Scott's other poems, though, *Roderick* was also an exploration of himself-as-bard. In the first lines he asked if any poetic metre could do justice to war: 'Such, WELLINGTON, might reach thee from afar'. He settled on Spenserian stanza, linking the modern war effort to the glories of British epic romance and to the laureate tradition. The poem itself was proud and bombastic, eulogising Britain, the 'warriors of the Minstrel's land!', and particular heroes such as Wellington.<sup>79</sup> It closed with 'a Patriot's parting strain' and an image explicitly derived from Spenser.<sup>80</sup> Scott thus consciously presented himself as Britain's national bard, doing all that a bard should do in support of Britain's glorious war, and following on from an allegorical epic that panegyrised King Arthur and Elizabeth I.

79. *The Vision of Don Roderick*, p. 198.

80. *Ibid.*, pp. 199, 203.

But the poem failed to receive universal approbation. It was portrayed in the *Edinburgh Review* by Francis Jeffrey as not so much patriotic as partisan. ‘We are not very apt to quarrel with a poet for his politics,’ he declared.<sup>81</sup> However, he pointed out that Scott had withheld his praise from the man Jeffrey considered to be the most deserving British hero of all: General John Moore. Jeffrey then embarked on a long harangue-cum-tribute concerning the virtues of Moore, and Scott’s silence regarding him.<sup>82</sup> Moore had died in the Battle of Corunna (a successfully managed evacuation of British troops, under attack from the French), and had come to be seen as a hero by the (more pacifist) Whigs and as a coward by the (more belligerent) Tories.<sup>83</sup> Jeffrey asserted that Moore’s death was ‘a noble theme’ for ‘an *impartial* poet ... But ... Mr Scott has permitted the spirit of party to stand in the way, not only of poetical justice, but of patriotic and generous feeling’.<sup>84</sup>

Obviously, the squabble went far beyond the relative merits of Moore. The *Quarterly Review* reviewer had thought the Peninsular War the greatest possible subject for Scott’s muse.<sup>85</sup> Yet Jeffrey believed the very premise of *Roderick* to be wrong. ‘All experience has shown, that there can be no successful poetry’ on ‘the heroes of the last Gazette, or the victory for which the bells are still ringing’.<sup>86</sup> Similarly, in his earlier review of *Marmion*, he had described ‘a triumphant allusion to the siege of Copenhagen’ as ‘the last exploit, certainly, of British valour, on which we should have expected a chivalric poet to found his patriotic gratulations’, and an instance ‘of bad taste’.<sup>87</sup> Jeffrey’s unease with such subjects reveals profound tensions around the concept of a national bard for the national war effort; it is notable that he should have argued Moore’s death to be a subject for ‘patriotic’ feeling, while speaking ironically of Scott’s ‘patriotic gratulations’ on the subject of Copenhagen.

The nation—and, particularly at this critical juncture, the war effort which impinged upon all questions of nation and patriotism—was a controversial issue. By 1813, Britain was far more united on the question of war than it had been at any point over the last two decades. But the ‘national’ war effort was, nevertheless, aligned with the Tories and the court against the Whigs and the *Edinburgh Review*. The Peninsular War was the project of the Prince Regent and the Tory administration; the Whigs had always looked on it far more unfavourably, predicting defeat and calling for peace. The Whig hero Moore was, after all, the

81. *Edinburgh Review*, Aug. 1811, p. 389.

82. *Ibid.*, pp. 390–91.

83. Sutherland, *Scott*, pp. 159–60.

84. *Edinburgh Review*, Aug. 1811, pp. 390–91.

85. *Quarterly Review*, Oct. 1811, pp. 223–6, 234–5.

86. *Edinburgh Review*, Aug. 1811, p. 379.

87. *Edinburgh Review*, Apr. 1808, p. 35.

hero of an evacuation.<sup>88</sup> That is why, for Jeffrey, *Roderick* was not a national epic, but party propaganda. Scott might have set himself up as a national bard, but, by writing of great national events, he could reasonably be viewed as propagating the message of one party against another.

Britishness, evidently, was not something simple, single or coherent. It may indeed have been the case that, with the nation thrown into an existential struggle against its oldest enemy, the idea of a courtly national bard gained a resonant circulation, and fed into the selection of Scott and Southey for the laureateship. But the matter cannot be fully understood without looking in more detail at the multifariousness, the utility, and the contestedness, of wartime national identity. In particular, the conflict between the Whigs and Tories, and between the *Quarterly Review* and the *Edinburgh Review*, must be investigated.

Between them, these two rival quarterlies set the agenda for discussion on political, social, cultural and economic affairs.<sup>89</sup> While the other most popular reviews and magazines of the time sold about 3,500 copies a month, or, prior to the *Edinburgh*'s founding, 5,000 at best, the *Edinburgh* and *Quarterly* each sold about 13,000 in their heyday, meaning a readership of perhaps 100,000 each.<sup>90</sup> They institutionalised a dichotomy of opinion, setting the framework and terms for debate. The *Quarterly* aligned itself with the ministry, and strongly supported a vigorous war effort; the *Edinburgh* was Whig, and was relatively pessimistic and pacifist. Initially, the *Edinburgh* (founded in 1802) had been mostly neutral on questions regarding the war and political reform, and Scott had been one of its regular contributors. But it had gradually become more partisan, and by 1809 was explicit and proselytising in its views. Scott, who favoured an aggressive prosecution of the war, had become fed up with the *Edinburgh*, and helped to set up its unimaginatively named rival, intending to provide the same functions as the *Edinburgh*, but from a Tory, pro-war perspective.<sup>91</sup> Southey and Croker were both among the original contributors, and were, for some time, the *Quarterly*'s main writers.<sup>92</sup>

Yet it would be wrong to view either periodical purely in terms of party identity. For one thing, the parliamentary system was not, at

88. CLRS, 2211, Southey to Neville White, 25 Jan. 1813; 2364, Southey to Charles Watkin Williams Wynn, 15 Jan. 1814; B. Hilton, *A Mad, Bad, and Dangerous People? England, 1783–1846* (Oxford, 2006), pp. 199–222.

89. For more on the periodicals, see Craig, *Southey and Romantic Apostasy*, *passim*; J. Clive, *Scotch Reviewers: The Edinburgh Review, 1802–1815* (London, 1957); S.M. Lee, *George Canning and Liberal Toryism, 1801–1827* (Woodbridge, 2008), pp. 12–17.

90. M. Butler, *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries: English Literature and its Background, 1760–1830* (Oxford, 1981), pp. 116–17; W. St Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge, 2004), pp. 572–4.

91. Craig, *Southey and Romantic Apostasy*, pp. 49–50.

92. Speck, *Southey*, pp. 128–9.

this stage, organised on straightforward two-party lines, even if it was tending that way.<sup>93</sup> For another, insofar as it is possible to talk of a 'Tory party' and 'Whig party' at all, neither party was institutionally connected with either periodical. The *Edinburgh* would occasionally offend the leading Whig politicians with the extremity of its views,<sup>94</sup> while one of the *Quarterly*'s founding figures was George Canning, who, in the years that he was most heavily involved with it (1809–12), was piloting his own small Pittite faction in parliament, separate from Tories and Whigs alike (though in agreement with the Tories on the prosecution of the war).<sup>95</sup> The two periodicals thus constituted their own political arena, which was arguably a more rigidly demarcated and ideologically charged one than Westminster, even if neither publication can be described as entirely coherent in its beliefs.

The case of Southey demonstrates this point. Having been associated with radical causes in the 1790s, Southey was still idiosyncratic in his views, and still entertained much the same principles as he had done when younger. But he had come to view the existing church and state establishment as, for the time being, the best guarantor of those principles.<sup>96</sup> When he joined the *Quarterly*, he told his uncle that his new associates had 'no common opinions' with him except 'about Spain, & the necessity of war ad interaeternam with Bonaparte'.<sup>97</sup> But these 'common opinions' were on the most important subject of the time, and because of them he supported the Liverpool ministry. This is how the Prince Regent's reputed comment in favour of Southey—he had 'written some good things on the Spaniards'—should be understood: it related to the war, in which Britain was helping liberate Spain from Napoleon. Similarly, Southey's most recent major work was a biography of Nelson—a British war hero—dedicated to Croker, the man currently responsible for prosecuting the naval war.<sup>98</sup> By 1813, Southey was probably most prominent in the public mind for this biography (which was a commercial success) and his contributions to the *Quarterly*.<sup>99</sup> These writings, and these associations, would have helped to make him palatable to men like Hertford. He had a long-standing position as a British poetic genius; now, he was also committing his pen to the wider endeavours that centred on the *Quarterly*, principally the winning of the war.

Britain was involved in a monumental conflict, requiring a 'national' war effort and a 'national' bard, but, to a significant extent, all this was nonetheless the preserve of one party against another—one periodical

93. Hilton, *Mad, Bad, and Dangerous People*, pp. 195–209; Lee, *Canning and Liberal Toryism*, pp. 12–17, 77.

94. E.g. the 'Don Pedro' article of 1808. Clive, *Scotch Reviewers*, pp. 110–14.

95. Lee, *Canning and Liberal Toryism*, pp. 118–22.

96. Craig, *Southey and Romantic Apostasy*, esp. pp. 212–15.

97. CLRS, 1596, Southey to Herbert Hill, 8 Mar. 1809.

98. Speck, *Southey*, p. 151.

99. *Ibid.*, pp. 151–2; Craig, *Southey and Romantic Apostasy*, pp. 10, 45, 49–50, 54.

against another—one regime against its enemies. While the Whigs, before and after Fox's death, had grumbled about the war and called for peace with Napoleon, Liverpool (with the endorsement of the court) had prosecuted that war with an avid and single-minded determination. The administration had focused all attention and resources on it, given Wellington their full support, and pursued total victory. The hatred felt by Scott and Southey for the tyrant Napoleon was shared by court, ministry and much of the populace, but in intellectual Whig circles, sympathy for the original spirit of the French Revolution, and a preference for Emperor Napoleon over Bourbon despotism, lingered on. Whigs, with their pacifism and defeatism, were attacked as unpatriotic; Southey and Scott both made this identification. In the *Marmion* epistles, Scott said of Fox that he should be praised for having died a Briton, because, at the end of his life, 'dishonour's peace he spurn'd'.<sup>100</sup> In his review in the *Edinburgh*, Jeffrey angrily leapt upon this: 'The only deed for which [Fox] is praised [by Scott], is for having broken off the negotiation for peace; and for this act of firmness, it is added, Heaven rewarded him with a share in the honoured grave of Pitt! It is then said, that his errors should be forgotten, and that he *died* a Briton—a pretty plain insinuation, that, in the author's opinion, he did not live one'.<sup>101</sup> It was in this same review that Jeffrey objected to Scott's 'patriotic gratulations' on the siege of Copenhagen.<sup>102</sup> Evidently, Jeffrey recognised Scott's attempts to characterise British patriotism as something exclusively belligerent, and something which was to be located, above all, in the figure of Pitt (whose followers became the Tory Liverpool administration). He likewise used his *Edinburgh* articles to resist this version of British national identity, and to expound a version of Britishness which contained ample room for pacifism and Foxite political reform.

Earlier in the same review, Jeffrey had taken issue with *Marmion* 'both on critical and on national grounds' for 'the neglect of Scottish feelings and Scottish character that is manifested throughout ... The story is quite independent of the national feuds of the sister kingdoms ... we nowhere find any adequate expressions of those melancholy and patriotic sentiments which are still all over Scotland [with respect to the battle of Flodden Field, which *Marmion* centred on] ... too little pains is taken to distinguish the Scottish character and manners from the English'.<sup>103</sup> Jeffrey, in these complaints, was again trying to problematise Scott's version of Britishness. The Britain of *Marmion* was seamless, single-minded and warlike; Britons, although they once might have fought amongst themselves, were essentially a unified people, capable of finding pleasure in the glorious depictions of their

100. *Marmion*, p. 49.

101. *Edinburgh Review*, Apr. 1808, p. 50.

102. *Ibid.*, p. 35.

103. *Ibid.*, pp. 12–13.

former civil battles, and, by the same token, standing together in the present day in opposition to Napoleon, untroubled by qualms of conscience or by their particularities of origin. Jeffrey saw the danger in such a depiction—that it was a Tory and pro-war fiction—and attacked it from every angle. He asserted that Britain was a nation, and a concept, that contained room for division and particularity; that, by extension, it was not unpatriotic to emphasise more local and particular concerns, or to object to the policies of the London-based court and ministry, or to question the tide of bellicosity. And he emphasised the ‘melancholy and patriotic sentiments’ of the Scottish, indicating that patriotism *could* be grouped with more negative emotions—such as doubt, regret and pessimism—and even suggesting that, perhaps, Britons might come to have just such a patriotic melancholy about the result of their current war. Just as Scott, Southey and the *Quarterly* could use a version of Britishness centred on war and loyalty to the Crown to justify their desires and actions in the domestic political arena (and in the context of the more specific *Quarterly–Edinburgh* struggle itself), the *Edinburgh* writers could use their own version to do the same; these rival uses were necessarily indistinguishable from the discursive act of creating them.

Of course, Jeffrey’s criticisms also centred on the more overt charge that, in *Marmion*, Scott was not being sufficiently Scottish. The *Edinburgh Review* itself, as its name asserted, was a product of Scotland’s capital city, and of the particular kind of Lowland, urban intellectual culture that had become associated with post-Union Edinburgh. Scott had formerly written for it, before deserting it for the new *Quarterly*. On face value, then, Jeffrey’s charge against Scott might seem to be a fairly straightforward one, involving an assertion of Scottish patriotism against a man who had abandoned his country in favour of a toadying Unionism, focused on Westminster and unsympathetic to ‘Scottish feelings and Scottish character.’ But the case is more complicated, and, to better understand it, it is worthwhile considering Colin Kidd’s recent work on Unionism. Kidd has argued that, although it is difficult to find great surges of Unionist sentiment or coherent articulations of Unionist political programmes throughout post-Union Scottish history, this taciturnity is the sign of an overwhelming ‘banal Unionism’, meaning that, from at least 1746 to the 1880s and beyond, the Union held an uncontested dominance in Scottish politics, being widely accepted by Scottish society and requiring neither defence nor justification. Related to this is Kidd’s second major argument: that Scottish politics and Scottish literature, being essentially unconcerned with issues of nationalism and Unionism, were predominantly actuated by issues of party-political and denominational identity. From the early eighteenth century onwards, a set of partisan divisions were played out against the vague backdrop of banal Unionism: dynastic (Hanoverian

versus Stuart), religious (Presbyterian versus Episcopalian), sociological (Highland versus Lowland), and party.<sup>104</sup>

It is this context that needs to be borne in mind when considering Jeffrey's charges against Scott. Although Jeffrey was invoking Scottish particularity, he was doing so as part of a partisan struggle in which the battle lines were drawn not geographically, between England and Scotland, but ideologically, within the Union as a whole. Jeffrey, representing the disgruntled Whigs of Edinburgh, was attacking Scott as a member of the Tory ministerial interest that treated Scotland like a pocket borough, maintaining Tory power in parliament while ensuring that Scottish political culture remained dominated by that Tory interest. As with British national identity, so with Scottish: Jeffrey's appeal to 'Scotland' was to a partisan, usable version of Scotland, which can be directly correlated to the circumstances and motives of the appeal being made. At this stage of the war, with the Whig party not particularly numerous in the House of Commons and not particularly popular with the British political nation, and with a recent tentative attempt to bring Whigs into the administration having proven futile, it was clear that the Whigs' role was in opposition, rather than in government.<sup>105</sup> This correlates perfectly with Jeffrey's insistence on a 'distinguish[ed]' Scotland, marked out in separation and opposition to the idea of a seamlessly united Britain ruled over by a Tory ministry. Had the Whigs been in power, it is unlikely that Jeffrey would have been so concerned about writers who elided Scotland with England. Likewise, as we have seen, Jeffrey was engaged in a specific version of the Whig–Tory struggle; namely, that of the *Edinburgh* against the *Quarterly*, a struggle which was not simply one venue for a greater political or ideological battle, but was itself a constituent element of that battle, unique in its nature and determined as much by its own specific mechanics as by any abstract principles. Thus, it made good sense for Jeffrey's *Edinburgh Review* to remind its readers of Scottish distinctiveness, and of the United Kingdom's diversity, in contrast to the blithe, insensitive notion of a homogeneous Britain standing behind a belligerent Tory ministry that was being advanced by Scott and the *Quarterly*. Scott's Scotland was necessarily warlike and Tory; Jeffrey's was necessarily distinct and oppositional.

This contrast also emphasises the fact that, when articulating a notion of Britishness, there was a range of different possible identities that could be played upon or ignored as individual circumstances required. William Thomas, in a monograph on Croker and Macaulay,

104. C. Kidd, *Union and Unionisms: Political Thought in Scotland, 1500–2000* (Cambridge, 2008), pp. 1–38; C. Kidd, 'Union and the Ironies of Displacement in Scottish Literature', in G. Carruthers and C. Kidd, eds., *Literature and Union: Scottish Texts, British Contexts* (Oxford, 2018), pp. 1–40.

105. The attempt followed Spencer Perceval's assassination in 1812. Hilton, *Mad, Bad, and Dangerous People*, pp. 221–2.

has stressed the importance of Croker's Irish Protestant background in the formation of his political views, suggesting that he, Wellington and Castlereagh (and in some sense Burke) all shared aspects of an 'uprooted' Protestant Irish mindset; their Toryism (or conservatism) was more inclined to be legalistic, unsentimental, political and constitutional than that of their English political allies. Their concern, especially in Burke's and Croker's cases, was to defend an entire social order and way of life, identifiable across Europe, rather than a particular locality.<sup>106</sup> In this interpretation, then, the construct of Tory Britishness as it existed in 1813 was being written about (Croker), administered (Croker and Castlereagh), and fought for (Wellington) by men for whom 'Britain' was conceptualised as the leading guarantor of the *ancien régime* (among other things). This argument has some significance for Southey's appointment as laureate, not least because of Croker's roles at the *Quarterly* and in advancing Southey's cause; it allows us to better understand the nature of the particular construction of Britishness which produced the offers to Scott and Southey. This understanding of national identity was being created by the Scots and the Protestant Irish, as well as by the English. It was thus capable of answering to the particular contexts and requirements of Ireland, Scotland and England, and it incorporated an appreciation of each of the different kingdoms (as well as of the Welsh, as in *Madoc*), even as it suggested that they constituted a single, united kingdom, loyal to a beloved monarchy, and devoted to the fight against Napoleon. Such a Britain could only have a poet like Scott or Southey as its laureate.

The issue of the war must again be brought to the forefront here, particularly on account of Southey. As already noted, he was not a self-identified Tory like Scott, and his views were idiosyncratic. Yet Southey took a much more aggressive stance against the Whigs than did Scott, and especially against the *Edinburgh* (which was, in his eyes, a mouthpiece of devilry and treason). As well as fighting the good fight in the pages of the *Quarterly*, he fought it in his poetry. Indeed, in his first *ex cathedra* poem as laureate, *Carmen Triumphale* (1814), he not only celebrated the victories of the Peninsular War, but, in the poem's notes, conducted a running battle, or running celebration, against the *Edinburgh*: it was as if his struggle against that periodical were the parallel of Britain's war against France. He quoted past editions of the *Edinburgh* relentlessly, simply so as to mock the defeatism which had been proven wrong by events.<sup>107</sup>

For Scott, Southey and the *Quarterly* in general, then, the *Edinburgh* was an organ of un-Britishness, and was to be portrayed in just such a way so as to stifle it. The Prince Regent and the ministry, conversely,

106. W. Thomas, *The Quarrel of Macaulay and Croker: Politics and History in the Age of Reform* (Oxford, 2000), pp. 36–43.

107. 'Southey's Notes to *Carmen Triumphale*', in *Later Poetical Works*, ed. Fulford and Pratt, iii. 607–18.

were the patriots; it was they who owned the national war effort against Napoleonic France; it was their pro-war, establishment and anti-reform position which was the only true British position. This was why Scott and Southey supported the regime, and why the regime wanted Scott and Southey, the belligerent geniuses, for the laureateship. On the overridingly important issue of the war, Southey, Scott, *Quarterly Review*, party, court—and a particular construct of the ‘nation’—were all in perfect agreement: fight to the end.

## VI

So far, much has been made of the potential plasticity of notions of Britishness, and of the way that different discursive contexts generated different versions of the nation. It has been argued that, due to the demands and impacts of the Napoleonic Wars, a particular construct of Britain was formed in validation of the Tory ministry and the war effort that it was presiding over, and that it was this construct which generated—or in some sense necessitated—the offer of the laureateship to Scott and Southey. Yet there is still a lacuna in the argument. The *Quarterly* and *Edinburgh* were not, of course, simply proclaiming their rival ideas to each other. They were putting them forward to the vast numbers of readers that each periodical commanded; they were setting the partisan agenda for the reading public. Likewise, when those who appointed the laureate decided that government funds must be allocated to the nation’s greatest poet, they were not motivated by a disinterested desire to see merit rewarded, but were conscious of that same reading public, before whom the laureate would stand in all his courtly glory. It was that public which gave meaning to everything that has been discussed in this article so far: without a sense of public opinion, or the importance of that opinion, there would have been no need to contend for ideas of Britishness, and no point in selecting a laureate considered ‘*digniori*’.

‘Public opinion’ is a concept that was of great concern to politicians and journalists at the time, and it has remained of interest to historians ever since.<sup>108</sup> Generally, modern scholarship holds that public opinion was felt to be the expression of either the middle classes as a socio-economic group, or of the ‘respectable’ elements of society (which, in practice, mostly meant what we would now consider the middle classes). Public opinion was therefore something that was referred to usually in positive terms, with MPs and newspapers demanding that it be heeded. However, it was also argued—especially, in a partisan context, by Tory politicians and writers—that government should

<sup>108</sup>. This paragraph generally follows the discussion in Lee, *Canning and Liberal Toryism*, pp. 108–18, 131, and (especially) J. Parry, *The Rise and Fall of Liberal Government in Victorian Britain* (London, 1993), pp. 6, 23, 27–36.

not be overly submissive to public opinion, and should be especially resistant to that wider, more capricious, less respectable force, 'popular clamour', which was not always as easily distinguishable from public opinion as might have been desired. Moreover, while the concept of public opinion was fairly straightforward—the collective opinion of sensible, respectable Britons on any given subject—its manifestations were more complicated. Newspapers, elections and constituents' communications to MPs were the most easily identifiable manifestations of public opinion, but references to 'public opinion' were by no means bound to any strict adherence to such materials. Some historians have thus been inclined to express scepticism as to how much substance the idea actually contained. Boyd Hilton, describing the concept as 'nebulous', argues that 'Politicians invariably claimed to have public opinion on their side, but in reality there was no such thing'.<sup>109</sup> Yet even if 'public opinion' (like 'Britain') was no mere description of an objective reality, it is nonetheless certain that the long eighteenth century did see an increase in the numbers of people who were willing and able to be vocal on national political affairs, and of their means of doing so. There was an increasingly numerous and literate middle class, and its sentiments were considered increasingly important at Westminster, even if the articulation of those sentiments there was (inevitably) distorted. The growth of middle-class political assertion and of (the concept of) public opinion were not evenly incremental; they tended to manifest most forcefully during times of crisis, such as wartime and economic downturn. By the early nineteenth century, however, they were a fixture of political discourse, and the Napoleonic Wars gave them unprecedented force.

What this meant for the principals in the laureate selection process is not entirely straightforward. Naturally, the opposition Whigs were more likely to appeal to the idea of public opinion, and to seek to exploit and cultivate its apparent dictates, than were the Tory ministers or Prince Regent. Tory ministers and MPs were to engage increasingly with public opinion in the post-war years, especially in the 1820s, and, by the end of his premiership (1827), Liverpool's own attitude was strongly consistent with this trend. Indeed, historians have tended to associate Liverpool's ministry in the 1820s with the idea of 'Liberal Toryism', one of the features of which was a more receptive and fruitful engagement with the public.<sup>110</sup> But Liberal Toryism's key figure was to be George Canning, who, in 1813, was not part of the government.<sup>111</sup> The Prince Regent and lord chamberlain, meanwhile, were not

109. Hilton, *Mad, Bad, and Dangerous People*, p. 311.

110. Lee, *Canning and Liberal Toryism*, pp. 2–7, 137–51; Parry, *Rise and Fall of Liberal Government*, pp. 6, 23, 33–44. For a recent analysis of this idea, paying close attention to the place of the word 'liberal' in political rhetoric of the 1820s, see D. Craig, 'Tories and the Language of 'Liberalism' in the 1820s', *English Historical Review*, cxxv (2020), pp. 1,195–1,228.

111. Lee, *Canning and Liberal Toryism*, pp. 1–7, 18.

remotely forward-thinking in their opinions on the relationship between government and populace.<sup>112</sup>

But this is not to say that they (or anyone else) were ignoring public opinion in 1813. By this time, it was impossible to ignore, and there were plenty of painful reminders as to its importance; most notably, the opposition's use of extra-parliamentary opinion over the Orders in Council in 1812. J.E. Cookson's study of Liverpool's administration from the end of the war to 1822, although not specifically covering 1813, emphasises this point, with public opinion playing a huge role in his account of political affairs and government policy. The distinction, then, is not a crude one between those who neglected public opinion and those who engaged with it, but a subtler one, based on the manner in which public opinion was acknowledged. Essentially, for the court and Tory ministry of 1813, public opinion was something which needed to be treated with respect, both because of its potential dangerousness, and because government was generally felt to exist for the good of the governed, but it should not be indulged too far or permitted to dictate terms. Government should be left to the king's ministers and to the members of parliament whom the political nation had selected as representatives; beyond that, the public was principally to be treated as an external arbiter, either bestowing its ratification on actions at Westminster, or, in extreme cases, reminding MPs and ministers that they should think again.<sup>113</sup>

It was this dynamic which validated the notion of Britishness elucidated above, and which made necessary the selection of first Scott, then Southey, for the laureateship. The Tory idea of Britain existed through its propagation to the reading public, and thus had to be proven to that same public. When the laureateship became available, court and government needed a poet whose greatness, and whose affinity with some sort of national bardic tradition, was widely acknowledged, so as to give the nation a courtly laureate it would approve. This would reaffirm the patriotic spirit of the ministry, and the court's cultural centrality to the nation. The sonneteer quoted previously had spoken of 'the nation's voice / Applaud[ing] and ratify[ing] the monarch's choice', and of Southey being 'the voice of Britain to the world'. This was, it can now be seen, a distinctly Tory notion of Britain and of the role of the laureate. As in parliamentary and government affairs, the public was not to dictate terms; it was to 'Applaud' and 'ratify' the choices of its rulers. In turn, the court poet would become 'the voice' of the nation: a court figure, not an opposition one, serving as spokesman for public opinion, a public opinion that was united, national and facing outwards to the world, rather than inwards at the business of government.

112. *Ibid.*, pp. 123–5.

113. J.E. Cookson, *Lord Liverpool's Administration: The Crucial Years, 1815–1822* (Edinburgh, 1976), esp. pp. 5–17, 36–69, 395–400; Lee, *Canning and Liberal Toryism*, pp. 114–17.

This picture, although characteristic of 1813, can also be tentatively linked to the subject of Liberal Toryism which hangs over the political historiography of the 1820s. In his study of Canning, Stephen Lee argues that the 'Liberal' elements of Liberal Toryism are generally over-emphasised, and that its distinctly Tory nature should be acknowledged. He shows that Canning's liberalism was exercised within, and in defence of, the existing constitutional system; for all that Canning sought to bring in public support and wider national sentiment, he did so as a way of legitimising the system that Tories were trying to defend against the Reform movement, and as a way of proving the system's flexibility and inclusivity.<sup>114</sup> Cookson, in a more incidental way, shows something similar for Liverpool's administration in the immediate post-war period: Liverpool and the more imaginative Tories recognised that they needed to engage with the public, not as a way of changing the unreformed system, but as a way of inculcating support for it.<sup>115</sup> Again, it is this precise dynamic that can be seen with regards to the laureateship. The office was 'confessedly Gothic', and many people wished to see it abolished; it could easily have suffered the fate of many other offices that disappeared during Pitt and Liverpool's successive efficiencies. Instead, it was maintained and renewed. Rather than being reformed out of existence, it was extended into the light of public approval; a great, national bard was appointed to hold it, thus glorifying both the office itself and the ancient ideal of courtly literary patronage which upheld it. The term 'Liberal Toryism' is not much used with regard to the war years, but Hilton has argued that, in the parliamentary business of the years 1812–15, there can be observed 'the stirrings of arguments that a decade later would come to define the differences between so-called high and liberal Tories'.<sup>116</sup> Southey's appointment shows something of the same phenomenon. It validated a Tory notion of Britain that was entirely fitting for its times, no matter how evidently rooted in the distant past.

## VII

Scott and Southey's selection, therefore, was not brought about simply by a wartime surge of nationalist feeling. Instead, it was the product of a fluid and divided national identity, which was diversely, endlessly fragmented and refashioned in the context of a personal and ideological struggle between different agents and interest groups which, in the absence of the clear two-party division that had existed in the later Stuart period, was primarily enacted in the discursive realm of the *Edinburgh–Quarterly* bipolarity. The Prince Regent, his Tory

<sup>114</sup> Lee, *Canning and Liberal Toryism*, pp. 2, 82, 86, 106–7.

<sup>115</sup> Cookson, *Liverpool's Administration*, pp. 396, 400.

<sup>116</sup> Hilton, *Mad, Bad, and Dangerous People*, pp. 231–5.

ministers and Robert Southey each had different political views from each other, just as (for example) Croker and Scott were each operating from different backgrounds from each other and from everyone else. However, within the context of the Napoleonic Wars, they all coalesced around a certain patriotic platform which validated the idea of a belligerent national bard being paid by for and associated with the royal court and a partisan government. This platform not only existed in opposition to the Whig, *Edinburgh* platform—which created and contested wartime national identity in its own, contrasting fashion—but was forged through the opposition itself. It was the practical, rhetorical and ideological exigencies of the dual struggle (external and internal), played out by reference to public opinion, that inspired the selection of Scott and Southey.

And yet, there is still an incongruity to be tackled here. Earlier in this article, I described how cultural production had changed over the course of the long eighteenth century, with a courtly mode giving way to a commercial one, and with the ideal poet transformed from a Virgilian courtier to a national, independent genius. It might therefore be thought that, whatever the circumstances, it would have been impossible for prince and politicians to select the two foremost poetic geniuses of the day, or impossible for Southey to have assented. Finally, then, this article must consider the juxtaposition of courtly and commercial.

When Pye died in 1813, none of the leading protagonists in the selection process seems to have thought of brushing off the office onto some quiescent, mediocre poet, or onto an inveterate place-hunter, as had been done before. Scott and (especially) Southey, although both friendly with Croker and employed on the pro-government *Quarterly Review*, were very different propositions to those who had preceded them. And yet they were chosen, with several of the most highly-placed men in the country concerning themselves in the selection, and with an avowed reason of ‘*detur digniori*’ given by those involved. Still more remarkable, it was not just those within the government who concerned themselves with the issue, but also some of their most high-profile political critics. When it became available in 1813, men such as Leigh Hunt and William Hazlitt exerted more scrutiny, more passion, and more argumentation upon the laureateship than had ever been seen in the office’s history.<sup>117</sup> Public opinion cared about the laureateship in 1813, and those in power, who were also the people most committed to the vigorous prosecution of the war effort, cared resolutely that it should be given to a great, national genius, who would be recognised as such by that public.

This being the case, it must be concluded that the laureate selection of 1813 held wider significance than ever before, and that a consideration of

<sup>117</sup> Pratt, ‘Introduction’, pp. xv–xvii.

that selection is illuminating for our understanding of national identity and cultural production (both separately and with reference to each other) in the early years of the nineteenth century. The Napoleonic Wars had created a unique and hyperactive context for the activation of national identity, in which the contested, contingent and diverse nature of Britishness became particularly evident. As part of this, a large swathe of opinion held that the national war required a belligerent national bard. While the idea of state and courtly sponsorship of literature had never entirely disappeared, it was given a resurgence by the tendencies of this opinion, which found its Hanoverian monarchy and its bellicose government to be integral to Britishness, and which therefore fully endorsed the idea that its national bard should be officially laureated, while still remaining an 'independent' genius. Scott and Southey, being great poetic geniuses who also wrote for the *Quarterly Review*, were the perfect choices for the role. Thus a 'Gothic' court office was reinvented in line with a modern, Tory national identity: the genius national bard became servant of the Crown and defender of the established system. It was a reinvention that, in a sense, had been possible throughout the eighteenth century, given the continuing existence of loyalist sentiment and traditional modes of literary practice, but one which, in the end, required the circumstances of the Napoleonic Wars to bring to fruition. It was also a reinvention which would prove remarkably enduring. The two subsequent appointees, Wordsworth and Tennyson, fitted the model perfectly, and even in the twenty-first century the prestige of the office has proven sufficient to turn such unlikely figures as Carol Ann Duffy and Simon Armitage into willing courtiers.

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