

Response paper. Scott R. MacKenzie, English, U of Mississippi

All modern editions of *Northanger Abbey* reproduce Jane Austen's brief *Advertisement*, explaining that "[s]ome observation is necessary upon those parts of the work which thirteen years [1803–1816] have made comparatively obsolete," but the only observation that Austen provides is, "places, manners, books, and opinions have undergone considerable changes." Given the theme of this symposium, the proximate change should probably be the 1815 Tambora eruption, which "caused crop failures, widespread animal deaths, and subsequent famine."ⁱ Heidi Scott argues that the climatic effects of Tambora register (stratigraphically?) in Byron's 1816 poem "Darkness," Thomas Campbell's 1823 poem "The Last Man," and Mary Shelley's novel of the same title (1826). Stratigraphy seems to be, especially when adapted as a figure for literary-historical delineations, a straightforwardly indexical form of historicism — "[l]ike stratigraphy, the reading practice called historicism holds that the literary record is linear, well punctuated."ⁱⁱ Eric Gidal has coined the term *biblio-stratigraphy*.ⁱⁱⁱ

But in any case, I cannot discern any sediments from the year-without-a-summer in Austen's advertisement includes. Perhaps there is an unconformity here — "a gap or disjunction in the stratigraphic record that marks a period where no deposits were left or where sediment has been removed by erosion. This break gives form to the intersection of multiple temporalities, forces, or media."^{iv} It "resists readability, preventing the flow of smooth 'historical continuum between past, present, and future'" (Cohen, "Anarky" 33). Austen does not say whether 1816 could not have witnessed "a very fine day, if the clouds would only go off, and the sun keep out" (79), nor a glimpse of "the last beams of the sun playing in beautiful splendour on [Northanger's] high Gothic windows" (152), but those may have been the circumstances under which the advertisement was composed.

One way to parse Austen's observation (and lack of observations) might be to cancel the biblio-stratigraphic implications of the word *change* and conjecture that it marks only a kind of dynamic homeostasis prevailing in "places, manners, books, and opinions." As with another often-assumed dynamic homeostasis, climate, a steady state of changeability, gradual, perhaps predictable variation, and ongoing cyclicity, may have been the understood routine for places — at least places like Bath —, manners, books, and opinions in the early nineteenth century.

According to this logic, Austen's version of change may adhere to something like the *oeconomia naturae* of Linnaeus, a 1749 proposal that Donald Worster characterizes as "a primitive first step" in ecological thought.^v In the Linnaean world system, "[a]ll movement takes place in ... a cyclical pattern that keeps returning to its point of departure" (Ibid. 34). Heidi Scott finds that kind of homeostasis prevailing in *Northanger*: "British novels of the nineteenth century mostly conformed to the convention of nature's constancy beneath human historical turmoil, from Scott to Austen, Eliot to Gaskell" (21). But by 1803, or 1797 (when Austen began *Northanger*), other models of natural economy had been published. Scott and Worster contrast Gilbert White's (1789) foundational ecological studies to earlier ones, emphasizing White's hypothesis that natural system can be radically altered by its own components: "[t]he most insignificant insects and reptiles are of much more consequence, and have much more influence in the economy of nature, than the incurious are ever aware of, and are mighty in their effect" (qtd. in Worster 7).

Jeremy Davies argues that geology, as James Hutton implemented it, offered a way of seeing deep time that was "'historical' rather than just 'temporal.'"^{vi} In its initial phase, however, geological historicism invested itself in gradualism or uniformitarianism, which saw deep time as

largely undifferentiated, consisting only in “slow physical processes, like sedimentation and erosion” that blur “into an effective stasis” (28, 26). Later, geology began to discriminate unusually rapid and flamboyant episodes of change, such as extinctions, eruptions, and ice ages. The twentieth-century doctrine of neo-catastrophism revised geological historicism so its designations of change became much more discrete and event-centered. But again, neither uniformitarianism nor neo-catastrophism seems especially evident in *Northanger*. Scott’s claim that Austen’s surrounds her characters with a Linnaean natural world is hard to contradict from a conventional eco-critical standpoint. The novel shows no indication of a sensitivity to anthropogenic catastrophe at a scale greater than ankle-deep dirt in the streets of Bath (82), nor to deep time, beyond Isabella Thorpe’s irritation at having to wait “these ten ages at least” (38).

The change that I propose for Austen’s unconformity is the conclusion of a period of not much more than 100 years during which many theorists of emergent capitalism presumed a set of infinitudes: the possibility of endless increase in production, population, and prosperity, without limits internal to the system (exchange, credit, labor, demand) nor external to it (natural resources, especially agricultural production). Samuel Hartlib, for instance, argued that, “[a]s God is infinite, and men are infinite by propagation, so the fruits of the Earth for their Food and cloathing are infinite.”^{vii} Capitalism was imagined as able to sustain unending growth in reciprocal circuits of prosperity: “it is manufactures must do the work, which will not only increase people, but also trade, and advance it”; “[g]et first but trade and people which will produce riches.”^{viii}

The idea of limitless productive and consumptional capacities was not universally endorsed. Intimations of the exhaustibility of arable land can be found in records of the Barbados plantation system, for instance, during the seventeenth century.^{ix} The horizon of absolute finitude — whose most prominent metrics had been fixed bullion quantity and the balance of trade doctrines that defined mercantilism — was, nonetheless, widely disavowed.

The end of this era of notional infinitude is not easy to locate precisely. Thomas Malthus theorized the inevitability of internally generated systemic crisis and repudiated *populationniste* theories of national prosperity. David Ricardo envisioned resource exhaustion: the diminishing returns of agricultural development, which “will necessarily be rendered permanent by the laws of nature, which have limited the productive powers of the land.”^x Gilbert White’s natural economy and the geology of James Hutton, as I have noted, found the systems of nature itself subject to historical change, rather than locked in permanent cyclic homeostases.^{xi} Recognition of extinction events and the capacity of massive industry to inflict crisis on ecosystems along with proliferating accounts of the relationships between naturally occurring and socially/commercially produced food shortages helped to dispel the simple infinitudes of early capitalism.

Most of these instances do not fall within the strict bounds of Austen’s thirteen years. To search for the precise historical watershed of modern global finitude between 1803 and 1816 might be as quixotic as Catherine Morland’s quest to discover Mrs. Tilney’s murder. As Jeffrey Jerome Cohen explains, “the point where difference becomes remarkable always seems consonant with the period in which the literary interpreter has been trained and finds an archive” (“Anarky” 36). My claim instead is that the author’s advertisement frames and the narrative enacts, as do many romantic texts, a version of the change from a world of boundless resource and immutable nature to universal exhaustibility and environmental crisis. While Heidi Scott’s claim that “nature’s constancy” holds in Austen may be impossible to disprove, the ancillary premise that nature is boundlessness may not be. Catherine Morland’s *bildung* in *Northanger* can

be read as a coming-to-terms with this socio-ecological change. From one whose earliest amusements are rustic and hardly differentiated, to a *debutante* who wonders “who can ever be tired of Bath?”, Catherine learns to understand Isabella Thorpe’s insatiable appetites as unsustainable, and to tame the extravagance of her own fancies to suit a nation where “roads and newspapers lay everything open.” Whether or not 1803–1816 precisely encapsulates the historical transition from infinitude to generalized scarcity, Austen’s narrative seems to stage its arrival in the appalling, destructive rapacity of the Thorpes and the comforting, disappointing recompense of Henry Tilney’s patronage. What we see negotiated is more than simply a Lockean compact against over-accumulation. It is a recognition that insatiable human wants terminate in exhaustion of resources.

ⁱ Heidi Scott, *Chaos and Cosmos: Literary Roots of Modern Ecology in the British Nineteenth Century* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014), 15.

ⁱⁱ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, “Anarchy,” 33.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ossianic Unconformities: Bardic Poetry in the Industrial Age* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia P, 2015), 15.

^{iv} Menely and Taylor, Introduction, 15.

^v *Nature’s Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas*, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994).

^{vi} *The Birth of the Anthropocene*, 28.

^{vii} *His Legacy of Husbandry* (London: Printed by F.M. for Richard Wodnothe, 1655), 175.

^{viii} Carew Reynell, *A Necessary Companion, Or, The English Interest Discovered and Promoted* (London, 1685), xiv, iv.

^{ix} See Peter Thompson, “Henry Drax’s Instructions on the Management of a Seventeenth-Century Barbadian Sugar Plantation,” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 66.3 (July 2009): 565–604.

^x Ricardo *The Works and Correspondence of David Ricardo, Vol.1, Principles of Political Economy and Taxation*, Ed. Piero Sraffa (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1951), 125–26.

^{xi} “Eighteenth-century geologists, including Cuvier, Buffon, Lamarck, and (a little later) Lyell, had discovered both deep time and cataclysm in fossil evidence” (Scott *Chaos and Cosmos* 23).