This is an ingenuous and an ingenious book. It will inspire
discussion in research on British Romantic literature, nineteenth-century
culture and colonialism, and, I imagine, on that more nebulous piece of
intellectual real estate, transatlantic studies. In particular, Wordworthians
should look at it, as it has much to say about his attitudes to British
politics, culture, and imperialism. How convincing its readers find the
book will depend, I think, on the kinds of evidence it adduces in making
its case, and the way it conducts that case.

Certainly it is an ambitious contribution. Culture, it seems,
“emerged as a governing idea” in the Romantic era (23). Indeed it was the
British Romantic poets who “first developed the idea of culture” (24), and
of them, Baker argues, Wordsworth and Coleridge did the hard work.
Accordingly the Lake School gets the lion’s share of the attention here.
But by “developing a new architectonic for modern poetic practice by
embarking on an intense involvement…with the sea” (xi; my italics),
Wordsworth and Coleridge modernized the classical notion of culture.
They linked it with Britain’s maritime existence, which very much occupied the cultural and political front page, needless to say, in the early years of the nineteenth century, when Britain’s “command of the sea had taken on heightened significance during the war with Napoleon” (1).

“Once one recognizes the ocean as the medium for history’s preeminent culture of modern empire,” Baker argues, “one can better see how the British Romantics derived from that maritime situation the form of the empire of modern culture” (5). On the basis of this formulation, Baker goes on to propose and describe a set of imaginative and cultural revisions of certain stock forms in European poetic culture — particularly the georgic, the pastoral, and the epic — in terms either of generic metamorphosis (epic into romance, for example) or of poetic and moral redeployment (the “maritime georgic,” for example). Caught up in this comprehensive revision of the sea in terms of the land and vice versa — above all by Wordsworth — are various intellectual derivatives, themselves familiar enough, like the distinction between the cosmopolitan and the insular, or between “absolute culture” (that is, “continuous diffusion and evolution”) and “the cultural absolute” (that is, associated with unique, isolated cultures) (17).

As a survey of this set of matters, or this set of possibilities, this study will, as I say, be of real interest. At the very least, the book certainly restores the sea as a central concern in the imaginations of Wordsworth and Coleridge, and in fresh and unfamiliar forms as a site of cultural formation rather than as some kind of Romantic natural absolute. But
some questions raised for me by the opening pages of this book became
only more insistent as I read on. First of all, Baker makes the Napoleonic
era largely responsible for begetting “the idea of Britain as an island
fortress commanding the ocean” — an idea that “defined, and doubtless
for many still defines, the topography of the British national imagination”
(4). Of course Baker cites John of Gaunt’s “famous ‘sceptered isle’
speech” from Shakespeare’s Richard II (63) — how could he not? And he
mentions Harrington’s Oceana alongside Daniel Defoe (137). But these
skimming references hardly give him grounds for the large-scale claim
that “More than ever,” in the Napoleonic era, “a maritime dynamic of
expansion of insularity informed the idea of British nationhood” (1; my
italics), and that it is “Ever since the Napoleonic era” that “the Anglo-
American imagination has been haunted by warships, whether captained
by Cook, Nelson, Wentworth, Vere, Hornblower, or Aubrey” (4). So the
British didn’t really start braving the sea until the end of the eighteenth
century? What about Raleigh, Drake, and Frobisher, one might ask? Or
William Dampier? Or the Armada, or Bacon on plantations, or Spenser’s
version of translatio imperii in The Faerie Queene (Book Three, Canto
Nine), which traces the origin of Troynovant, “that with the waves/Of
wealthy Thamis washèd is along,” to Trojan Brutus: “Another plant, that
raught to wondrous hight,/And far abroad his mighty branches threw,/Into
that utmost Angle of the world he knew”? Or what of that “memorable
day” in 1665 described at the opening of Dryden’s “Of Dramatic Poesy,”
“when our navy engaged the Dutch: a day wherein the two most mighty
and best appointed fleets which any age had ever seen disputed the
command of the greater half of the globe, the commerce of nations, and
the riches of the universe”? What about Defoe’s profound involvement
with the “South Seas” and what he saw as England’s manifest destiny
therewith? What about the line that leads from Harrington’s
*Commonwealth of Oceana* (1656) to James Anthony Froude’s *Oceana: Or
England and her Colonies* (1886), predating the same author’s lectures at
Oxford on *English Seamen in the Sixteenth Century* (1895)? The pre-
Napoleonic tradition and its afterlife are tucked too neatly out of sight here
— which is a shame, because the accommodation of them might have
strengthened the argument precisely by means of focusing it within a
larger context.

Similarly, one must be careful about “the idea of British
nationhood” and its indebtedness to the sea. To say “No part of Britain lies
more than seventy miles from the coast,” after all (25), is not to tell us very
much. Familiarity breeds as much contempt as reverence. Baker shelves
Austen’s *Persuasion* early in the book (15), which is itself an odd
decision, given what that novel has to say about the impact of maritime
life on landed culture; but then there is healthy, wealthy, and young Emma
Woodhouse, who can’t stand anybody discussing the sea: “I who have
never seen it.” For millennia, doubtless, the majority of Britons never took
that seventy-mile trip, and entertained entirely different ideas of British
nationhood, accordingly — if they entertained them at all. We must not
take the English myth at face-value, even if it suits us.
Besides foreshortening the history of British sailing and overstating the British consciousness of itself as a sea-going nation, Baker’s argument prompts a more important question. If Britain’s shift from the notion of a land-based culture to one based on the sea was so profound and so momentous, why should Baker need to go so far in search of evidence for it? On the contrary, it should well out of the ground everywhere he looks. But this prodigious shift in attitude is not simply restricted (as often as not) to the Lake poets; it rotates around speculative and hard-fought re-readings of their individual works, sometimes minor in nature. “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” is a genuinely significant work, to be sure — though to call it “the best-known example of British Romantic literature” (30) is needlessly going too far. But to claim that “its centrality stems in the first place from how it evokes the maritime beginnings of the systematizing work of modern empire, state, nation, literature and culture” (28; my italics) is to provoke disbelief that no amount of argumentation can resolve. Baker makes comparably strained claims for “The World is Too Much With Us” (37-41), “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison” (107-12), “Michael” (147-52), and “Ode to Duty” (185-8); and in each case I felt too much was being asked of both the poems and myself. A gentler line of argument would have been more attractive. Is Coleridge’s lime tree a broad-leafed linden, as I imagine most readers have imagined it to be, “transparent foliage” included? Or is it — seeing that his poem was composed in 1795, when “the British Admiralty had decreed that lime juice would be distributed to sailors to protect them from scurvy” (110) —
the citrus fruit, growing somewhere spectacularly sunny in Nether Stowey? Why are we reduced to speculations as far-fetched as these to furbish a case that ought almost to demonstrate itself?

Wordsworth and Coleridge are inexhaustible intellectuals, but I cannot say the same for the obscure folk Samuel Baker drafts in to swell his chorus. One is Bertrand Barère, author of *La Liberté des mers* (1798) — “a ponderous tome published to curry favour with the newly ascendant Napoleon” (45); another is Samuel Johnson Bentham, brother of Jeremy (96-8) and author of *Services Rendered in the Civil Department of the Navy* (1813); a third is the less-famous Bentham’s “heretofore occluded” (89) associate, Joseph Hanway (98-104), agitator for “an unrealized institution” catering for the education of boys for the navy, and author of (it seems) the most lavish charity prospectus published in the eighteenth century (98). Then there is one George Chalmers (“now an obscure figure” [95]), who wrote about oak trees; or “the now-forgotten John Fenton” (159), who wrote about solitude; or the Reverend Andrew Bell, whose “Madras system” of education has, it seems, been linked to a passage in *The Excursion* (93); or the “now-forgotten” (208) *Essay on the Practice of British Government* (1813) by Gould Francis Leckie, which might have been read by Coleridge and Byron. These unfortunates lend an inkhornish air to the discussion — especially when we’re told, for example, that Hanway’s chief claim to fame is his being the first Londoner regularly to use an umbrella (99).
Baker is candid about the gaps in his evidence even as he asks us to bridge them on faith. To be told after a discussion of “culture” in a passage from *The Prelude* that “this single case…is admittedly a slim reed” on which to hang a general claim (69) is only the first such confession. We get a lot about Herder, only to learn that “we have no record” that Wordsworth read him — “one has to imagine that the English poets discussed his work at some length” (75). Other trails of analysis seem to lead nowhere in particular. After taking us through John Fenton’s “Solitude,” Baker concludes, “I do not wish to argue for any particular influence of this exceptionally minor poem” (160). A discussion of “Coleridge’s later use of the imperium in imperio phrase” is admittedly a digression that “proves nothing about its meaning for him” in the period under discussion (182). “There is no evidence,” either, “that Byron ever seriously entertained Leckie’s ideas, much less agreed with them” (207). Similarly, Byron’s own *Letter to John Murray, Esq.* is said to be “strangely understudied” (216), though Baker doesn’t say why. After these cul de sacs it is a relief to be directed, at last, to a “comparatively well known notebook passage” from Coleridge (180) — not that I was familiar with it, I must say. The net effect of these prevarications is unfortunate, again because they detract from what could have been a stronger, because simpler, case. As it stands, the Romantic poets’ important cultural innovation looks like a secondary interest, even for them.

Yet I can’t help feeling that there is a compelling argument here, longing to get out. It is held back by over-long or belated summary
passages on seventeenth-century maritime attitudes (49-55), on the nature of cultural studies (55-60), on georgic (83-6), and on epic (163-6). It is blurred by passages in which too many poets and writers crowd the deck. Starting at page 123, for example, we meet Theocritus, Virgil, Phineas Fletcher, Milton, Dryden, Ovid, Spenser, Drayton, William Browne of Tavistock, and Coleridge in four pages; elsewhere (pp. 128-32) Baker segues from De Quincey on Wordsworth to Goldsmith’s *Deserted Village*, then to Raymond Williams, John Barrell, Leo Storm, and Alfred Lutz. Besides generating what seems at times a confusing stream of references, Baker tends to start a new section in his chapters before we have had time to put the contents of the previous one into overall perspective. There is a bold and fascinating theme here, but we are distracted from it too often. Finally, Baker presses the chronology of his argument too far beyond its originally stated terminus. Setting out to cover the decade 1799-1808, from “Churchill’s translation of Herder to his publication of his Nelson biography” (3), the book focuses overwhelmingly on Wordsworth, with Coleridge in a supporting role. But the last of its three parts brings Byron and then Matthew Arnold on stage too late and too superficially, then takes us into the twentieth century with a disquisition on Lionel Trilling followed by an “Envoi” on the work of Walter Benn Michaels and (if you please) on what the previous 250 pages have been “about” — which is “aboutness,” it seems. “Only the exhaustive is truly interesting,” Thomas Mann famously observed. But it doesn’t become so by itself. If one’s illustrations swallow up one’s thesis (as Coleridge once said of his own
writing), the exhaustive may become just exhausting. Nevertheless, the intellectual voyage attempted by this book is very much worth taking.

Even though Baker’s way of mapping his course leaves some things to be desired, the question at hand — on “the maritime space of modernity” (145) — is a genuine one.

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