In 2017, Tom Mole and Nicholas Mason organized the Blackwood's bicentenary conference at the University of Edinburgh, and for this collection of essays they drew on a cadre of distinguished specialists in the history of periodicals. These contributors—most of whom presented at the conference—operate from three premises: that in the words of the Introduction, the Romantic era was a "distinct and unusually dynamic moment in the history of British literary periodicals" (5); that its periodicals have received less scholarly attention than those of the eighteenth-century and the Victorian years; and that Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine is the best Romantic era periodical on which to test new approaches and methods, especially with the aid of digital tools. The sub-field of Romantic periodical studies, the editors argue, has been revitalized by a digital "archival windfall" that will require "reconceptualising the basic methods of literary research, retraining ourselves and our students to devise projects that are at once more ambitious in their historical and conceptual reach and more sophisticated in their use of archival evidence" (6). Although many of the excellent essays collected here might have been conceived, researched, and written with the aid of printed texts alone, the volume as a whole reflects the impact of digital methods.

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A few decades ago, Blackwood's (or "Maga," as it was dubbed) would not have been chosen for this kind of investigation. Preoccupied with major poets and progressive political stances, students of Romantic literature veered towards John and Leigh Hunt's Examiner, John Scott's London Magazine (home to Lamb's "Elia" and De Quincy's "Confessions"), and the Liberal. Students of intellectual history favored the Edinburgh, Quarterly, and Westminster reviews. Those interested in radical thought and action studied Black Dwarf and the publications of Richard Carlisle and William Hone. Because of Maga's ultra-Tory politics and virulent personal attacks on Coleridge, Keats, and Shelley, scholars often treated it as a mere foil. But when the "magazine" itself was recognized as an experimental new medium rather than as context, Blackwood's became central. Scholars newly fascinated by archival research discovered that Blackwood's had an intact archive of its own. In the late nineteenth century, the novelist Margaret Oliphant used it to write the story of Maga's early years in William Blackwood and his Sons (1897), and in the 1940s, pioneering Maga scholars like Alan Strout used it to identify who wrote what in the magazine. Recent work on Blackwood's includes, besides many journal essays, Print Culture and the Blackwood Tradition, ed. David Finkelstein (2006), Romanticism and Blackwood's Magazine, ed. Robert Morrison and Daniel Roberts (2012), the six-volume Selections from Maga's Infancy, 1817-1825 (2006), for which Mason was the general editor, and Maga-centric monographs by Mark Parker, Mark Schoenfield, David Higgins, Karen Fang, et alia. The present volume is an invaluable addition to this corpus.

Mason and Mole sort their eleven contributions into five categories, beginning with a focus on method. Jon Klancher compares the archival resources available now with the materials he used for his landmark study, The Making of English Reading Audiences 1790-1832 (1987): "What," Klancher asks now, "does the digital moment tell us about the medium of the periodical that wasn't as visible when we relied on print collections?" (17). His answer is less than positive for digital methods. Among many interesting observations, Klancher laments what is lost when we study periodicals via search engines, perusing the article rather than the issue. Joining what has already become a chorus, he bemoans the downward slide from a whole magazine to its digitized parts. Once sandwiched by its covers and clothed in advertisements, the magazine is stripped and bound, then reduced to a digital "witness" often scanned from prior microfilm products. "As bound volumes of early periodicals," Klancher writes, "are increasingly stored away and thereby made unavailable for browsing, we have to rely more on databases that have only hit-and-miss browsing capabilities in their current state" (18). As Kristin Flieger Samuelian also notes, browsing reveals "meanings not immediately apparent when articles are read separately," for "sequencing produces a more complex aggregate meaning" (216, 218). Like Klancher, Megan Coyer draws on her experience in doing research for an earlier work, Literature and Medicine in the Nineteenth-Century Periodical Press (2017). To show how the miscellaneous world of Maga dispersed serious medical content, she cites the 1827 essay by John Wilson (alias Christopher North) on Dr. Kitchener's The Traveller's Oracle, and she reads it as a "hybrid 'medico-literary' review, contributing both to the fictional world of Blackwood's and the magazine's ideological self-positioning in the literary marketplace" (43). Hybridity of all kinds is, in fact, one of the chief attractions of the magazine.

In the spirit of Maga, I permit myself a digression. Around 1980 I wandered into a New Hampshire book barn, where the proprietor was sitting alone with a bottle. After we talked for a while, he challenged me to a game of chess: if I won I
got to pick a book. Primarily because of my sobriety, I walked out with the 1843 Noctes Ambrosianæ of "Blackwood" (4 vols), and a new world opened for me. The pseudo-people warming their punch in Ambrose's Tavern in the "Noctes" would have approved of this manner of book acquisition. The "Noctes," which ran from 1822 to 1835, occupy the center of Romantic-era Blackwood's, and since they epitomize the hybrid surprises of its best articles, they are cited in almost every essay.

Exploring libel law and reviewing in the early issues of Maga, Tom Mole links the judgments of critics to the verdicts of judges in libel cases. Noting the "innovative experimental form, which blurred the boundaries between fact and fiction," he also observes the "dizzying" ways by which the "Noctes" interconnected articles (42). Along with Mole, Christine Woody uses J.L. Austin's speech-act theory to illuminate the performative nature of the utterances made by the interlocutors in Ambrose's Tavern. Likewise, Alexander Dick treats both real and fictional characters while showing how the Maga of lowland Edinburgh reflects ambivalent attitudes towards the depopulation of the Highlands—a process driven by landlords and profits from sheep. In probing this topic, Dick studies both the real James Hogg and the fictional "Shepherd" of the "Noctes." The "Noctes" themselves had classical roots. "While the Noctes distil the magazine's distinctive features," Mark Parker writes, "they also reflect a strictly defined genre — Menippean satire — in which exaggeration and ridicule become a mode of intellectual enquiry" (99). Also, by linking the "counter-enlightenment" of Freidrich Schlegel with Lockhart's nationalism (101), Parker's essay, like many in the volume, ties Maga to strands of thought and events from the broader world.

Mason and Caroline McCracken-Flesher both make excellent use of unpublished material from the Blackwood archive at the National Library of Scotland. While their essays are neither panoramic nor theoretical, they use this material to make quite particular arguments. Examining William Blackwood's interactions with Caroline Bowles as well as Bowles's early contacts with her future husband, Robert Southey, Mason partially refutes the "conventional accounts" that Maga was purely a "Tory gentleman's club" (161, a view already altered—as he notes—by scholarship on Felicia Hemans. In light of Bowles's influence on Blackwood, Blackwood's masculinity looks less toxic. Mason's essay thus shapes our perception of Maga and also significantly supplements what little we previously knew about the life of Bowles.

In a more complex argument, McCracken-Flesher ties theories of "home" to several figures: Thomas Pringle, one of the writers Blackwood discharged from Maga's forerunner, the Edinburgh Monthly Magazine, in 1817; Mary Prince, whose narrative of her enslavement Pringle helped into print over a decade later; and a little-known Blackwood's writer named James MacQueen. Since MacQueen belonged to the powerful West Indies lobby, McCracken-Flesher argues that he was particularly incensed by Prince's claim of the "right to determine her own home" (185). Like Mason's essay, this one challenges received opinions of Maga. While the magazine can easily be arraigned on simple grounds of gender and race, its complexities are always worth exploring. McCracken-Flesher's work on MacQueen also proves, I think, that we have much to learn about the lesser known writers for the magazine. Those who complied with the West Indies lobby, for instance, included the almost unknown David Robinson, who from 1824 to 1831 contributed over ninety pieces.

To conclude the collection, Joanne Shattock shows how Romantic-era Maga does two things. Besides forming a distinct entity, it also points the way toward what the magazine became in the Victorian years, when it was run by William Blackwood's sons and grandson. To meet the challenges made by a new tranche of periodicals such as Temple Bar (1860), Cornhill (1861), and Fortnightly (1865), the younger Blackwoods shifted its focus towards the imperial market and used it more frequently to promote the firm's books. In light of these changes, Shattock finds "creditable arguments for dividing [Maga's] history into editorial regimes, beginning with William Blackwood I" (241). Under him, we learn, Blackwood's assumed a regal character. In 1822, when the monthly numbers of volume 12 were collected to be bound, the volume included an address "To the King" that begins by praising George IV but then proceeds through a Peroration and two Postscripts to make it clear that Maga rules.

Ruling his contributors, William Blackwood himself used two key terms in corresponding with them: "Balaam" and "humbug." The first denotes contributions that didn't quite come up to snuff (or perhaps Ambrose's punchbowl) but were printed because the magazine had to get filled and published each month, "humbug" conveys both approbrium and praise. Sometimes embedding sophisticated ironies in bullshit, humbug manifested—among other things—what Mason and Mole call "a penchant for self-mythologising that included comically outsized claims about [Maga's] circulation and influence" (9). In other words, the stylistic facade of Maga was susceptible to shifts and eruptions, and given its mix of sincerity, intentionality, and irony, we cannot easily link any one of its personas to any of its known writers. According to Mark Schoenfeld, the "secret history" of Maga includes the kind of nonsense that delivers a "wink of confidentiality" (116). Periodicals from the early 18th century Spectator onward strove to foster an intimacy with their readers; Blackwood's does a step further. While Maga shared something of the magisterial tone of its Romantic precursors, the Edinburgh and Quarterly reviews, a more enticing voice that whispered of secrets was part of Maga's DNA. The infamous "Chaldee Manuscript" in the first issue of Blackwood's, which was replaced because of the uproar over blasphemy and libel, was the "open secret" (122) that everyone knew but that was coyly hidden from view. By October 1820, Schoenfeld notes, "An Hour's Tete-a-Tete with the Public" cements the lopsided intimacy of the corporate Christopher North with his multitudinous readers" (124). This mode of writing continues (though dwindles) in Maga until the death of William Blackwood in 1834.

The range and excellence of the case studies in this book demonstrate what the Introduction asserts: that Blackwood's may be a "laboratory for exploring the range of uses twenty-first-century scholars might make of Romantic-era periodicals" (6). I suspect, however, that the most read (and assigned) text from Romantic Blackwood's is still Lockhart's "The Cockney School of Poetry" (October, 1817). While Maga is a gold mine for scholars, can we recover the pleasure of reading it once famously felt by the Brontës as children? As much as I love the Menippean mode of the "Noctes," they are too densely topical to be read without footnotes. Witticisms aimed at Sir Robert Peel for "ratting" over the Catholic Relief Act flat fall flat in the classroom. Yet from its first issue, Maga published stand-alone tales, and if we look all the way to the end of the nineteenth century, they include Conrad's Heart of Darkness, serialized in 1899. If this collection of essays—as good a collection as I've read—could have been improved, it might have considered how we read the Blackwood's tale in the twenty-first century.

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